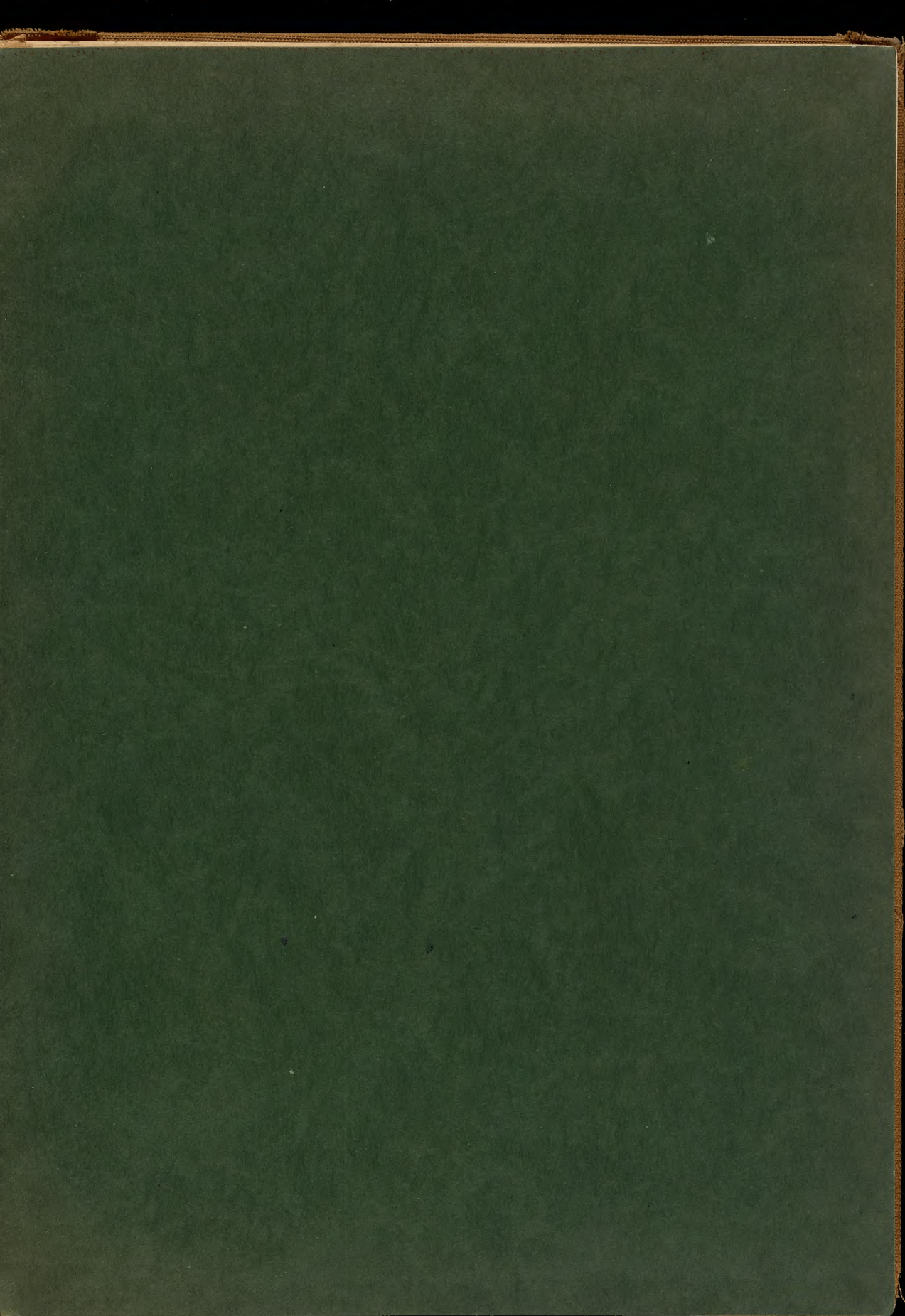


Stemmen





STEINLEN

STEINLEN AND HIS ART

TWENTY-FOUR CARTOONS



WITH A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION AND DESCRIPTIVE NOTES

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STEINLEN AND HIS ART.

THE following pages offer a selection from the work of one who ranks among the great artists of France. And this not only from the artistic standpoint. In the education and improvement of the more ignorant and degraded section of the people — especially French people — the pictures of Steinlen have played a very important part, and, by the magic of their inspiration, have often proved more effective than the harangues of the most famous orators and demagogues.

No illustrator of our time has been more successful in the interpretation of French character and of Parisian character in particular, none more able in the delineation of its countless aspects and manifestations. Wherever his art is exercised, the result is perfect and assured.

Nor is this altogether extraordinary, because in Steinlen's pictures the figures and attitudes of men and women, the very groupings of animals, are made to express a psychology so striking in its significance as to be almost oppressive. Again and again one may be confronted by one of these drawings, and experience the same emotion, the same surprise at the impulse hidden and unexplained, which yet can thrill so strangely the imagination.

Is it astonishing, then, that an artist of this stamp has become the founder of a school, and can claim, throughout France and even Europe, a large following of pupils, not to mention a whole crowd of imitators and plagiarists?

The French Government itself has not failed to realise the importance of Steinlen as a force in politics, and has even felt some uneasiness at a popularity so extensive as to appear almost dangerous to the national security. It was for this reason that the *Chambard Socialiste* found itself suddenly forbidden to issue certain numbers containing drawings by Steinlen of a too revolutionary nature. These drawings were considered dangerous by the authorities, who were no doubt influenced by their desire to restrain the popular unrest which was particularly active at the time, owing to the strike at the mines of the Pas de Calais. Simultaneously it was rumoured that pressure was being put on the artist to leave France for a while, a course which calls to mind the exiles and excommunications which, in other countries, have been the fate of so many men of outstanding genius. Whether the rumour be true or false, it serves at any rate as a convincing proof of the amazing force of Steinlen's artistic personality.

For Steinlen, pre-eminently among draughtsmen, has known how to endow his art with a social, an almost economic significance. The misery of the poor, their immorality, the corruption that is rampant everywhere and in every class, such are his themes. The picture of things thus conjured up may well appear little short of a menace to the future, a menace above all to those at the head of affairs. No wonder the authorities like to close their eyes. No wonder they are

anxious to be rid of such a prophet, even to the extent of ordering him to leave their country and shake off its dust from his feet.

Only a few years ago the number of doubtful characters in Paris (*apaches*, procurers, and dangerous criminals) was estimated at 30,000. The police, on the other hand, was a body only some 8,000 strong. Such a disparity is deplorable, for it is a fact that nowhere else in Europe is crime so bold and shameless, by day and by night, as it is in the shadow of *La Ville Lumière*. The *apaches*, especially, wage war against the police like veritable wild beasts, inventing for this purpose methods of almost diabolical originality. A police officer, on approaching what appears to be a gentleman in an automobile, is killed by a revolver fired point-blank by the motorist, who turns out to be an *apache* in disguise; while the infamous Liaboeuf, with his leather bracelets furnished with spikes of iron, is only one more example of the malignant weapons of defence which are being adopted by the up-to-date criminal. Too cowardly to use the ordinary human means of selfprotection, he adopts the methods of the porcupine!

So much for the tigers and the wolves of Paris. There are also its hyenas, prowling round the outlying quarters of the city, solitary, the better to hunt and catch their human prey. Along the banks of the river they lurk, catlike, waiting for sunset and the darkness that shall provide a fit veil for their horrible trade of savage and stealthy assassination.

And she has too, this city of splendor her little gutter-snipes, her children that are the very incarnation of poverty, rummaging about, for all the world like little animals, among the offal, and quarrelling over the rags they find there. And Paris, finally, harbours her serpents, brilliantly habited, luxuriously housed, but dangerous none the less; and her vipers, that wait shamefully till fall of day and then come out from their sordid lairs with appalling boldness to work mischief on the race of men. Women these, or what once were women.

It is not, though, to such types only that the art of Steinlen is attracted. He shows us the whole of Paris, and France itself, and that from every possible aspect. The life of Paris, indeed, he has seen and known in all its completeness. That life so complicated, so troubled, so nervous, so often diseased, so invariably feverish, he has studied experimentally, and with the eyes of genius. So it is that each drawing, each sketch, whether in colours or in black and white, becomes in its groups of figures, faces, furniture, or surroundings, the expression of a diagnosis. Steinlen, no less psychologist than artist, is naturally concerned for the most part with the life of the metropolis which he has also made his home, and the artist's choice in this respect has risen doubtless from his realization of the fact that Paris is the heart of France, and that being diseased, and dangerous therefore to the whole organism, it is there that treatment is most needed.

Critics have often pretended to explain the much-imitated quality of the master's style and the peculiar *cachet parisien* which pervades it, by the fact that Steinlen has passed the greater part of his life in Montmartre, a quarter notoriously devoted to bohemian artists, demi-mondaines, good-for-nothings, idlers and vagabonds of all descriptions. But this is only half the truth and likely to

lead to misunderstanding. For that which primarily inspires a man of great creative power is not the special aspect of things so much as their very essence. What must have touched Steinlen most cannot then be conceived simply as the life of Montmartre, but rather as the essential life of Paris as he found it reflected there. In making Montmartre his home, Steinlen simply chose that quarter of the city which inevitably attracts to itself those sections of the population in whom the essential spirit of Paris is most flagrantly demonstrated. And in this, as a true student of psychology, he acted wisely, inevitably; allowing the effect of his environment upon himself to exercise its due and normal influence on the external direction, so to speak, of his talent.

In this connection it should be noted that Steinlen is not French by birth, but Swiss, though at the age of 23, a full-grown man, he was born again at Paris. It is said that a novel of Zola's first drew him there. It is therefore a reasonable surmise that the artist of the pen made a profound impression on his brother of the pencil. Yet it must be borne in mind that facts such as these represent probably little more than a coincidence, and only illustrate what was said above as to the influence of external conditions on the art of a master. The motive power of the artist remains inexplicable. Derived from other sources, it is but little affected by the hazards of this life. Silently it grows out of actions and re-actions in the soul of the man of genius, mysterious even to himself. For is it not possible — probable even — that a book by Dostoevsky might have attracted Steinlen to the other end of Europe with consequences to his art similar to those which followed his residence in Paris?

That Steinlen seems more powerful as a personality than most of his contemporaries results from the fact that he envisages life more intensely, more vehemently than they. He is more *penetrated* by his subjects than other artists, and so is better able to pierce to their fundamentals. So also is he able to render outward appearances in a style which reveals so particularly and exactly their character that when confronted at an exhibition by one of his pictures amid a crowd of alien works, one cries out almost instinctively, "There's a Steinlen!"

This style, naturally enough, has found a host of imitators. It is seductive especially to young artists, sometimes to the extent of endangering individuality. But for him who is thoroughly imbued with the authentic work of the master, the counterfeit will be readily detected. There can be no mistake, for the imitation is like an envelope, sealed, it is true, but with a seal which is obviously a forgery.

When all is said, it remains an almost impossible task to portray by verbal details the inner quality of a work of art. It is much easier to insist on the negative side than the positive, to point a contrast than to demonstrate the real source of its individuality. Pursuing the easier line of criticism, one may say that in the works of Steinlen it will be wasted labour to search for intricacy, complexity of line, refinement or *nuance* of colour. Like all the greatest artists, Steinlen seeks and finds his effects by the simplest means. With a palette of only three or four colours he wields the wand of a magician, and transforms the most trivial objects into things of the most valuable significance. In some such

way Rodin has also worked, in the not wholly dissimilar medium of marble. For, in a sense, the sculptor and the artist in black and white share a common difficulty which does not face those painters who have at their command the whole complex range of colour out of which to pick and choose at will. Steinlen has discovered that greater secret of selection and simplicity — virtues which have been praised so eloquently by almost every writer on art. Voltaire, indeed, has put the matter in a nutshell when he says, very wittily, that "the secret of being a bore is the art of saying everything"; while Schopenhauer, in his chapter on the Metaphysic of the Beautiful (*Parerga et Paralomena*) calls attention to the well known paradox, that the effect produced by a complete picture is often far less profound than that of the simple rough sketch on which the picture is based. The truth of these two observations, and others of the same kind, seems to consist particularly in this, that the great geniuses of the world have always dealt with the essential, and that for the artist who has penetrated to the essential, unrelated secondary qualities need not loom too large. It is by the representation of inherent character rather than of accidental or special features that works of art absorb us and make us think of the eternal verities. This is a mysterious conception, but one which all true lovers of fine art will understand. It suggests the reason why it is so important that the creative impulse should have its source in the essential rather than the external, and explains also, incidentally, how it is that this impulse is often shown at its strongest in the mere sketch, the rough outline, the melody still unharmonised, the piece of sculpture that yet lacks the crowning touch. Secondary features come after, and it is not in them that we must search for the breath of life. They only add a decoration, splendid perhaps, but for ever extraneous. Such an aesthetic theory is well applicable to the drawings of Steinlen. For if ever there was an artist who went straight to the heart of his subject, that artist is he; so that, whether he is presenting to us the figure of a man of Paris, or of Lyons, or France itself, it is always the image of universal humanity that he shows us — humanity with all its weakness, its passion, its happiness and its sorrows.

It may be readily understood that art of this kind lends itself pre-eminently to combination with literature and poetry. Hence springs the collaboration with the popular and witty poet Aristide Bruant, which has resulted in those two admirable and charming collections of French chansons known as *Dans la Rue* and *Sur la Route*. So, too, the French author, Emil Morel, could have chosen no better illustrator than Steinlen for his book dealing with the life of the miner, *Les Gueules Noires*.

So much for the principal characteristics of Steinlen's art. Let the reader now proceed to consider the actual examples which follow. As a help to the proper estimation of them this slight Introduction may perhaps be of some value. We shall, in any case, say no more, except to accompany each drawing with a short explanatory note or a brief reflection on subject or situation, where such seems to be required.

I.

PORTRAIT OF STEINLEN.

II.

THE OUTRAGE OF THE PAS DE CALAIS.

This drawing was made in 1893, and has reference to the dismissal of 800 miners from the works of the Calais Gas Company. This dismissal, said the popular press at the time, was equivalent to a sentence of death, because all the French mining companies were at that time leagued together in a confederation. This meant the institution of a general lock-out.

III.

MISERY IN THE SNOW.

This picture of a procession of unemployed needs no comment. It is the reality itself.

IV.

ON STRIKE.

This appeared in *La Feuille*, an anarchist journal, and affords a good example of what was said in the introduction concerning the simplicity of Steinlen's method. Here is no complication of line or detail. A few strokes are all that is needed to express the cruel and disdainful attitude of the soldiers towards the workmen over whom they are keeping guard.

V.

A DISHONOURABLE PROPOSAL.

"Choose, my pretty one, choose. You are free to stay with me on my own terms, or to leave my employment." Such an episode is, alas, only too common in the life of the working woman, especially in Paris.

VI.

THE CHILDREN AND THE RICH MAN'S DOG.

Some children are foraging in a dust-bin. The impertinent little dog near by, in his embroidered covering, points a vivid contrast between wealth and poverty.

VII.

HOT CHESTNUTS.

This drawing is inspired by a poem by Jules Youy. The children are famished and half frozen. With the penny which they have begged, they are buying hot chestnuts. The girl is about to eat them straight away. But the boy prevents her. The more practical of the two, he bids her warm her hands from them first, and eat them afterwards.

VIII.

THE THIEF.

A terrible representation of incipient crime. Here, in the face of the boy, are expressed all the instincts, the latent possibilities of evil, the very lust of theft, realising itself and claiming its victim.

IX.

THE OLD MAN.

Scene: a country village. The villagers are coming out of church, gossiping together over the details of the day. Some of the women and children stand about listening to an old beggar singing in the street. Quite the type of wandering beggar is he, roaming from village to village, imposing on the simple country folk with his romantic decrepitude. All this is expressed most sensitively in the man's whole pose, and especially in his face. And he sings — bleats like a sheep, rather — the same old song, day after day, week after week. He is a sly fellow, and a little hysterical, touching the women when occasion offers, and chucking the girls under the chin.

X.

MISERY.

A young mother, destitute, her baby dying on her knee, dying of hunger, content to die. The mother also is helpless, half starved, with no force left even to feed her baby. The whole figure is eloquent of a dull, stupid misery, the misery which has forgotten how to help itself, and is next door to madness.

XI.

WAITING THEIR TURN.

A scene in a soup kitchen.

XII.

THE ORGAN-PLAYER.

Remarkable for the suggestion of colour, conveyed by three simple tints.

XIII.

THE CROSSING-SWEEPERS.

Early morning, the wonderful moment when night wakes into day. Behind that great building which resembles the *Opéra*, the sky is reddening. In the foreground a humorous scene is being enacted. Two crossing-sweepers, old friends, meet by chance for the first time after many years of separation. The result — for we are in France — is obvious.

XIV.

AN APACHE.

He is a mystery. Whence does he come? Whither is he going? What does he want? That is his secret. When day dims to evening, and darkness falls on the Seine, then out he comes like a beast of prey, wandering along the river bank, tracking among the shadows. Suddenly, he looms up before some frightened passer-by. A knife gleams, and before the other has time to think of defending himself, the deed is done. And after he has despoiled his victim, he makes away as silently as he came.

XV.

AT THE BALL.

The clumsy dancers in the background remind one somewhat of those rather brutally realistic dancers in some of the fair-scenes of Peter Breughel: a similarity, no doubt, unconscious on Steinlen's part.

The scene in the foreground is a touching one. Note the contrast between the fine gentleman with his trimmed moustache, his shiny top-hat and artistic tie, and the delicate little girl apparently far gone in consumption. The atmosphere of viciousness that hangs over it all is unpleasant to a degree, yet incomparable in the ability of its suggestion.

XVI, XVII, XVIII.

IN THE SUBURBS.

In this series of prints Steinlen is depicting feminine vice at its lowest and most sordid. Women, who have not even the pretence of womanliness, ply their trade as best they may, under conditions of the utmost degradation. This is the dark side which the conventional conception of Paris as the gay city falsifies and conceals.

XIX.

THE LUMP OF SUGAR.

A picture which must appeal to all lovers of animals.

XX.

THE RETURN FROM THE WASH-HOUSE.

The public wash-houses are one of the institutions of Paris. Here is a group of muscular young women bringing home their clean linen tied up in bundles.

XXI.

THE STRIKER.

A dangerous figure, this man who makes it his business to excite his comrades by revolutionary theories, encouraged too often by a state of semi-intoxication. It is in just such an atmosphere as this that the political propaganda of the poor is carried on.

XXII.

THE FUNERAL.

A procession of work-people following the hearse which carries the body of their late employer.

XXIII.

METAMORPHOSIS.

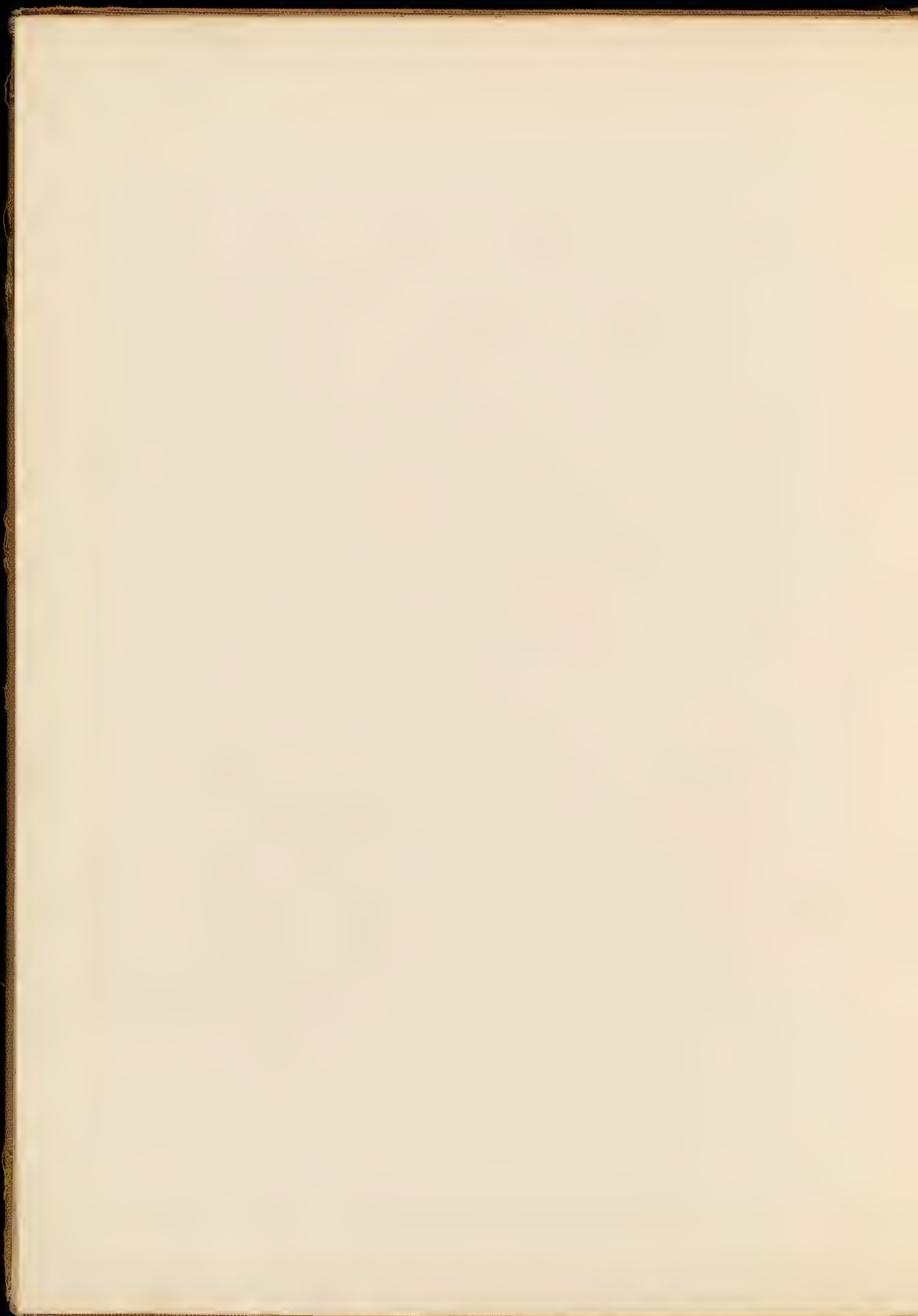
Suggested by a poem of Raoul Gineste. Midnight has struck, and from the chimneys of the city rise witches, riding through the air on their broomsticks. An example of the more fantastic side of Steinlen's art, and remarkable as demonstrating how close is his grasp of actuality even when dealing with the wildest flights of the imagination. The realism of this drawing in no sense falls short of that displayed in his most every-day subjects.

XXIV.

SUBURBAN LOVE.



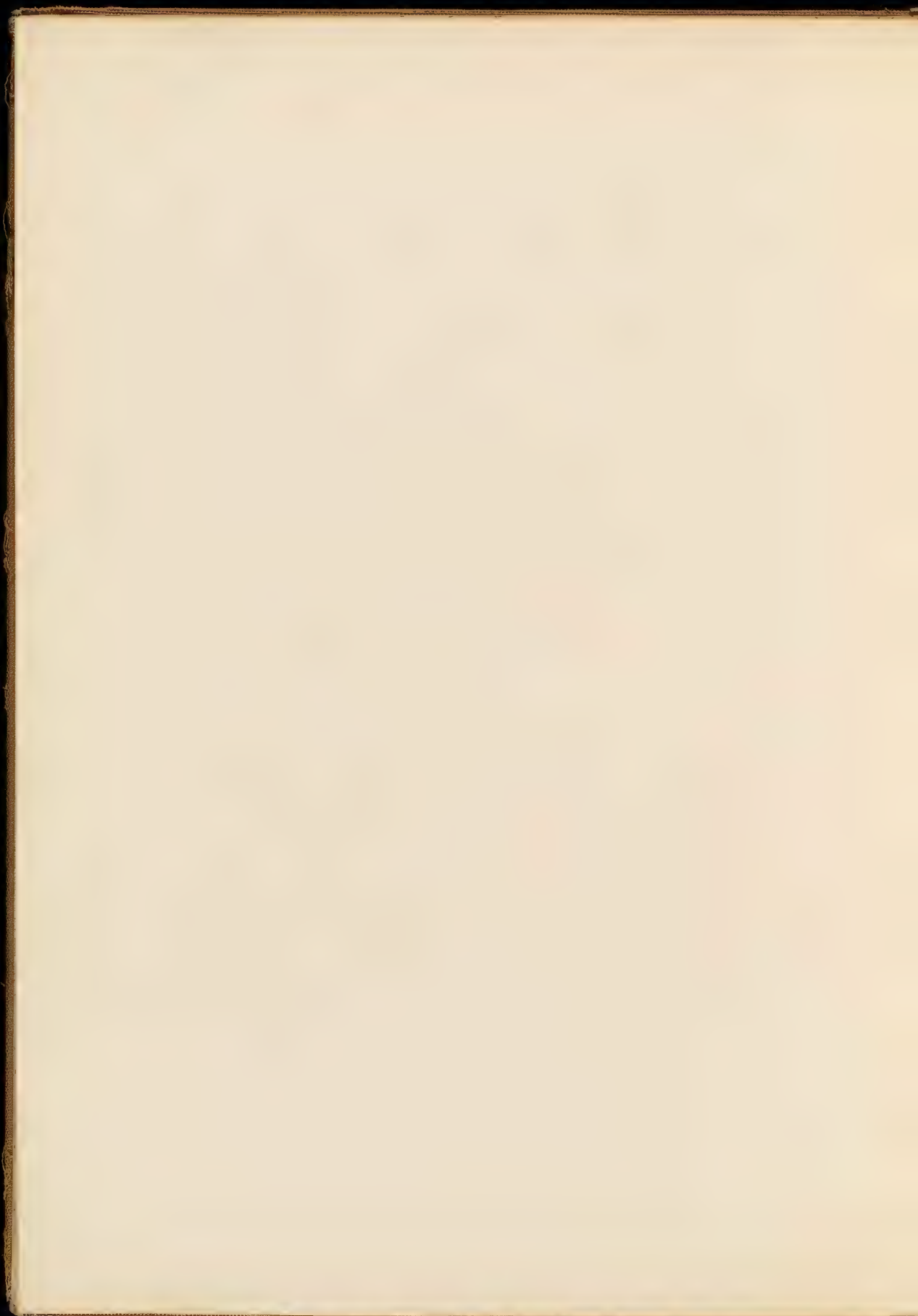




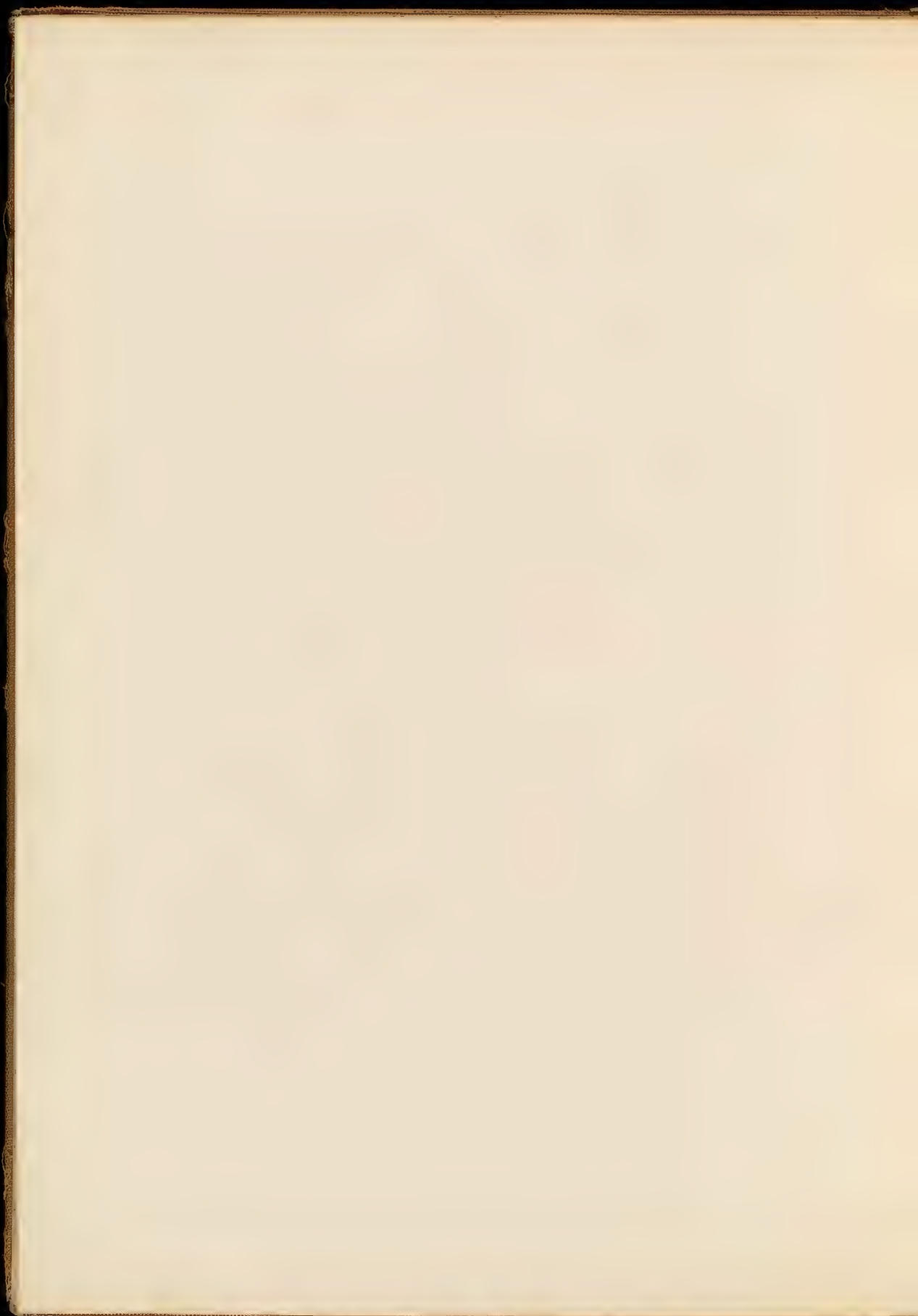


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Petit Pierre

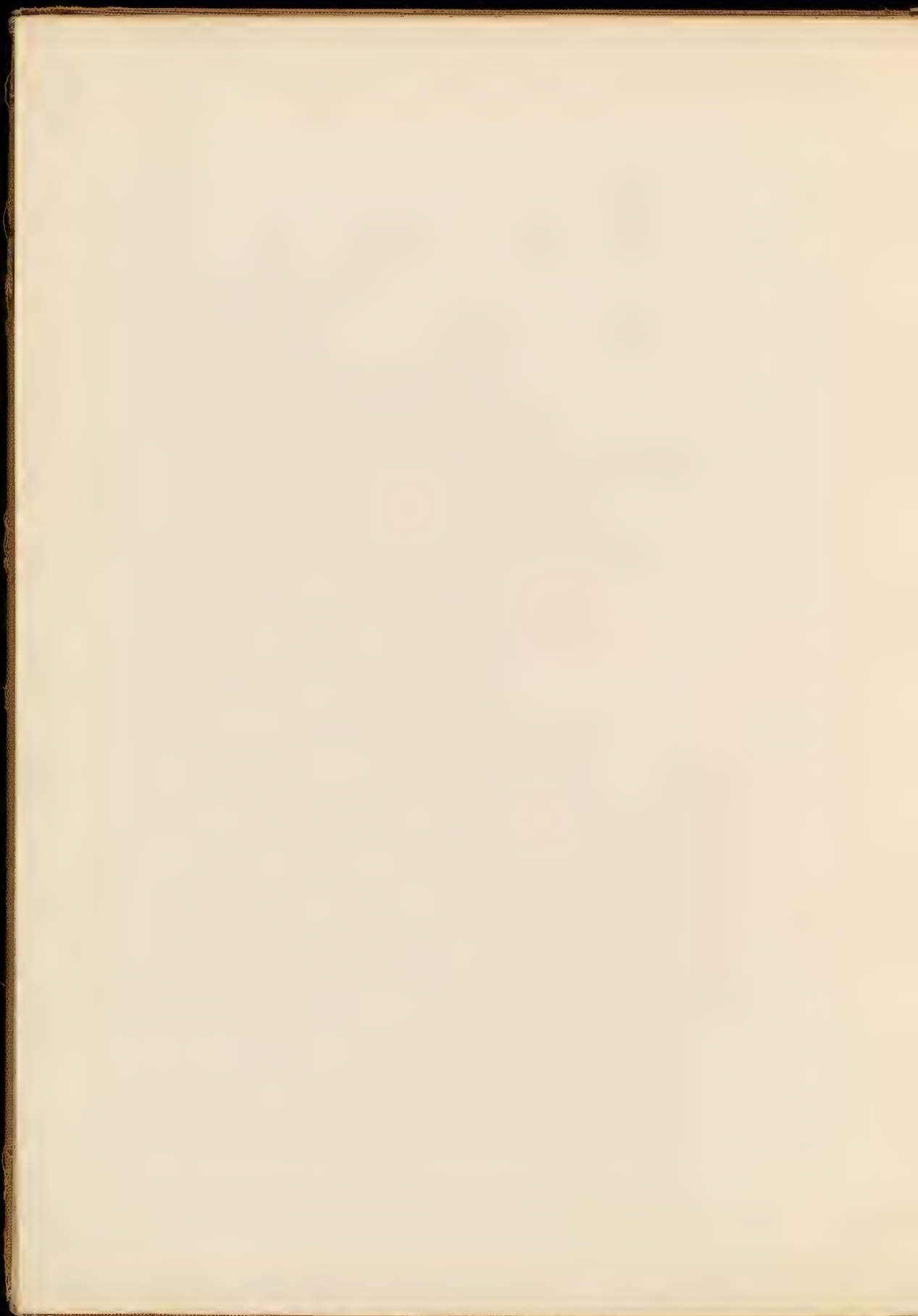




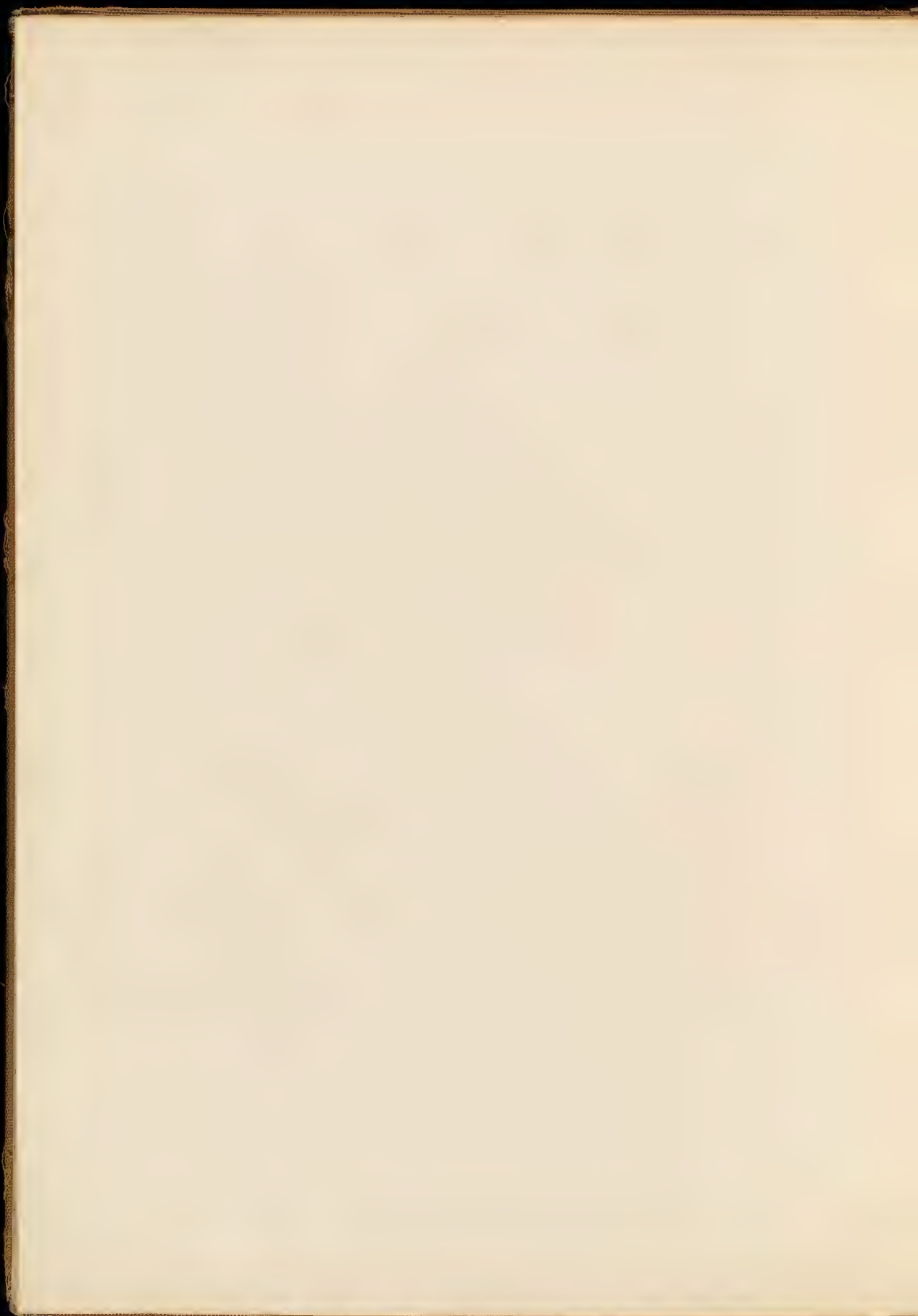




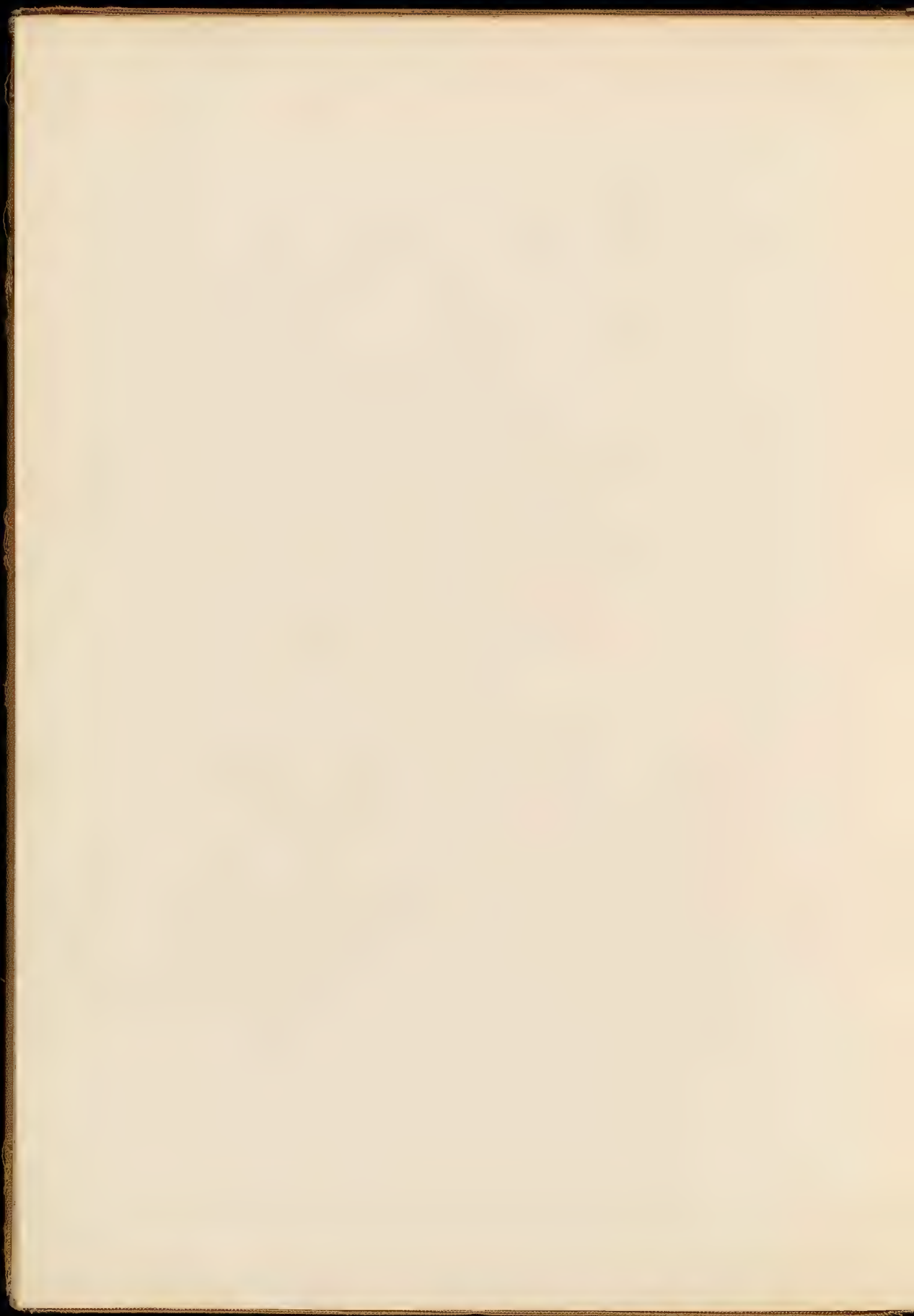
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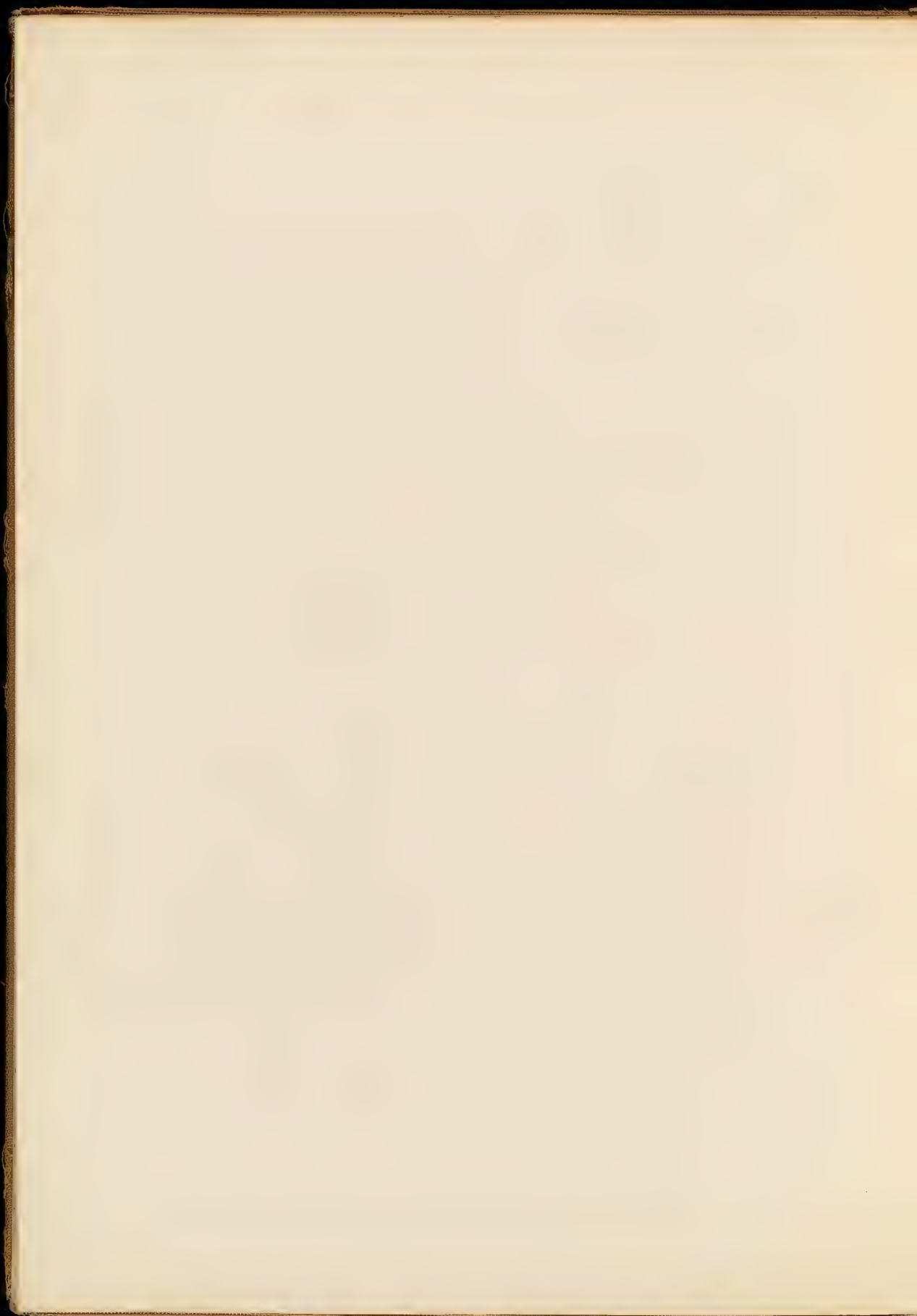




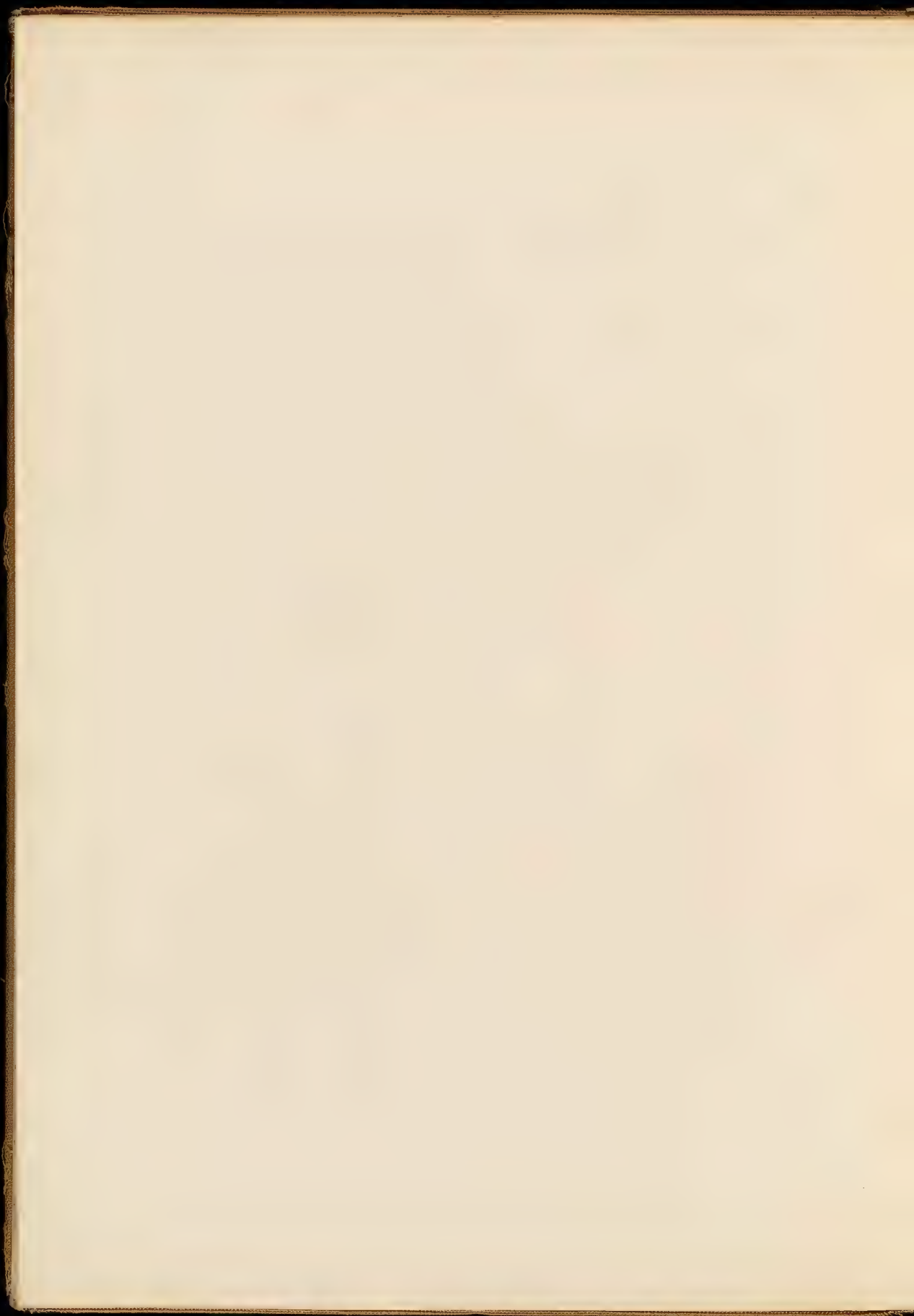








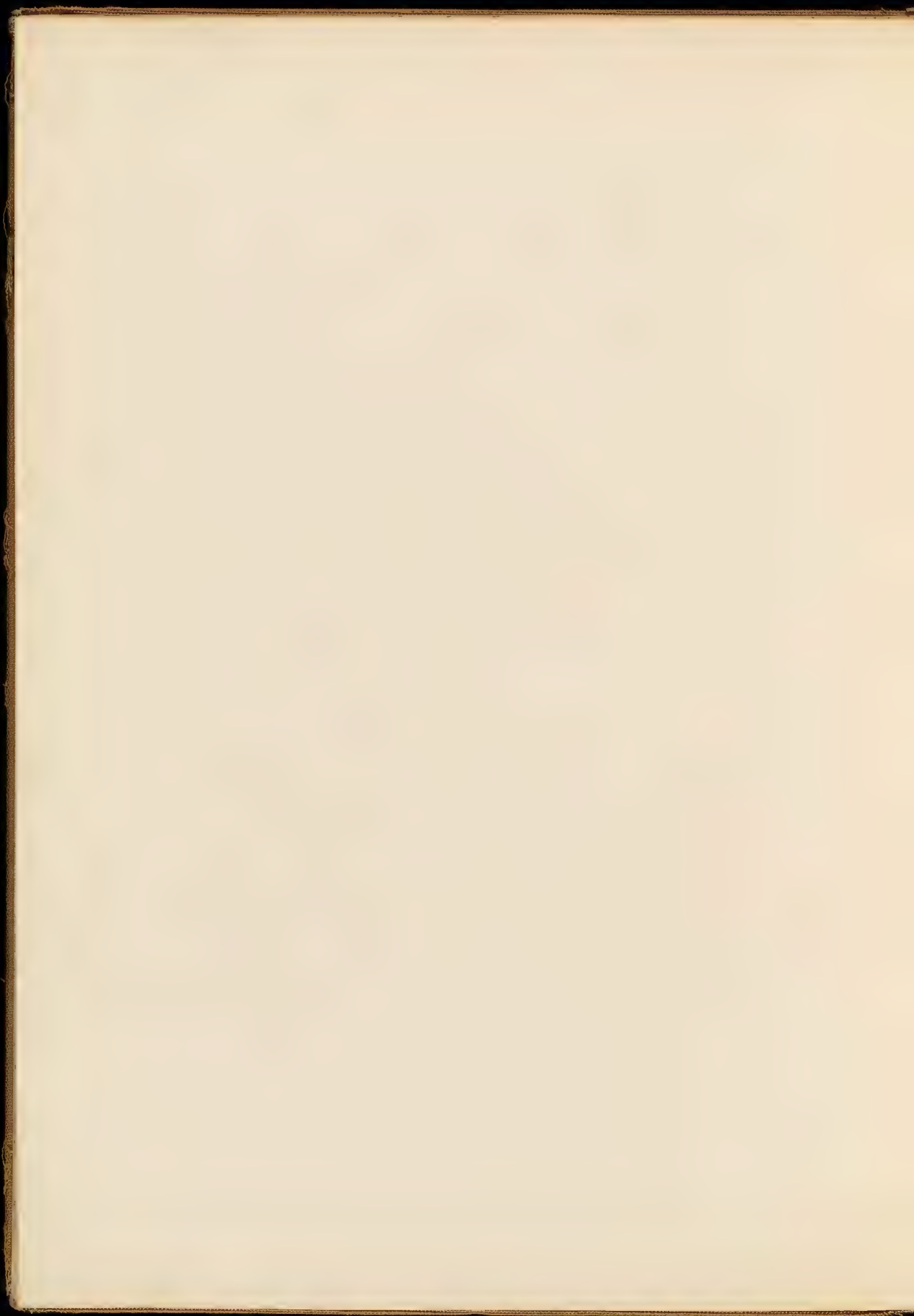






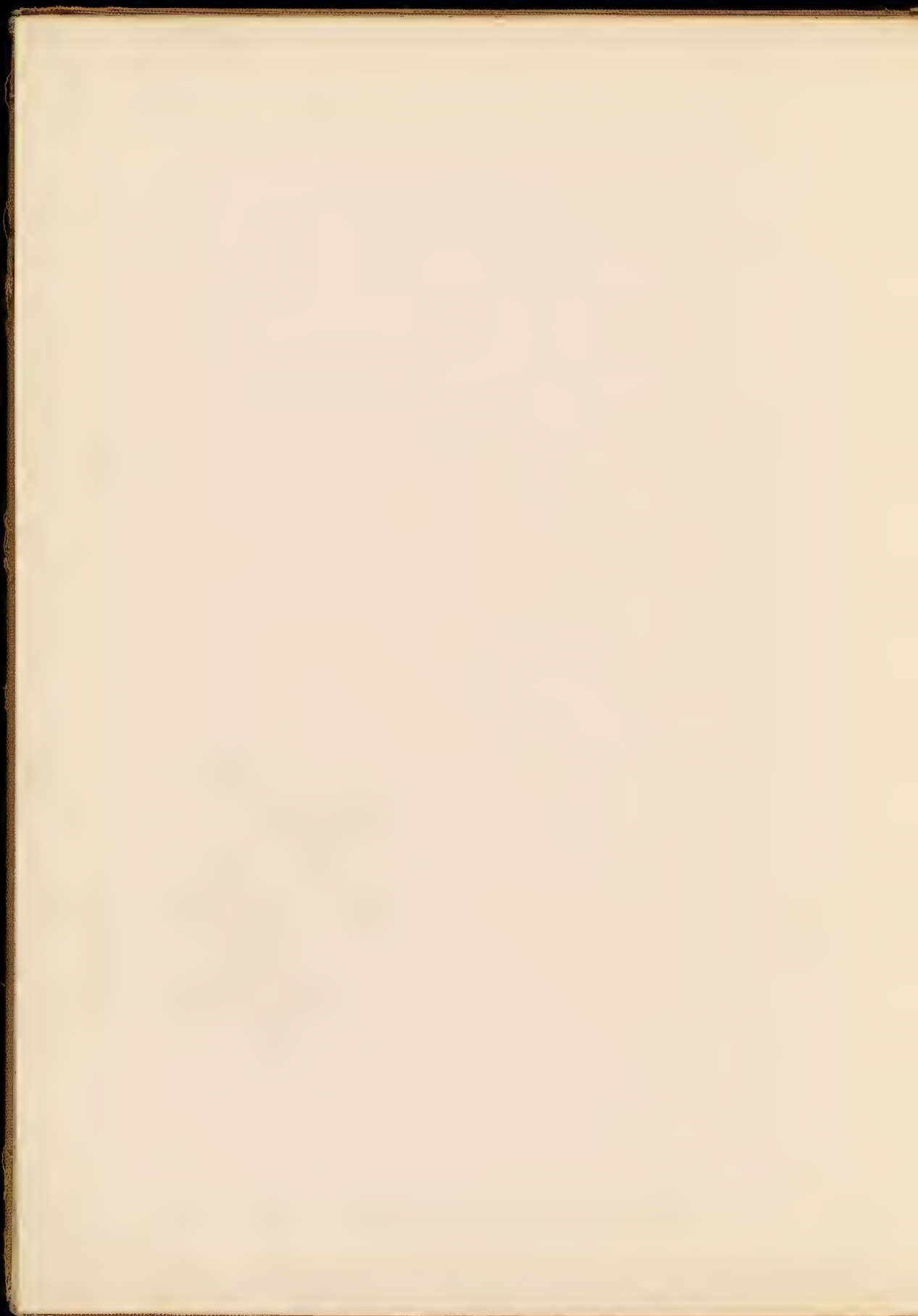
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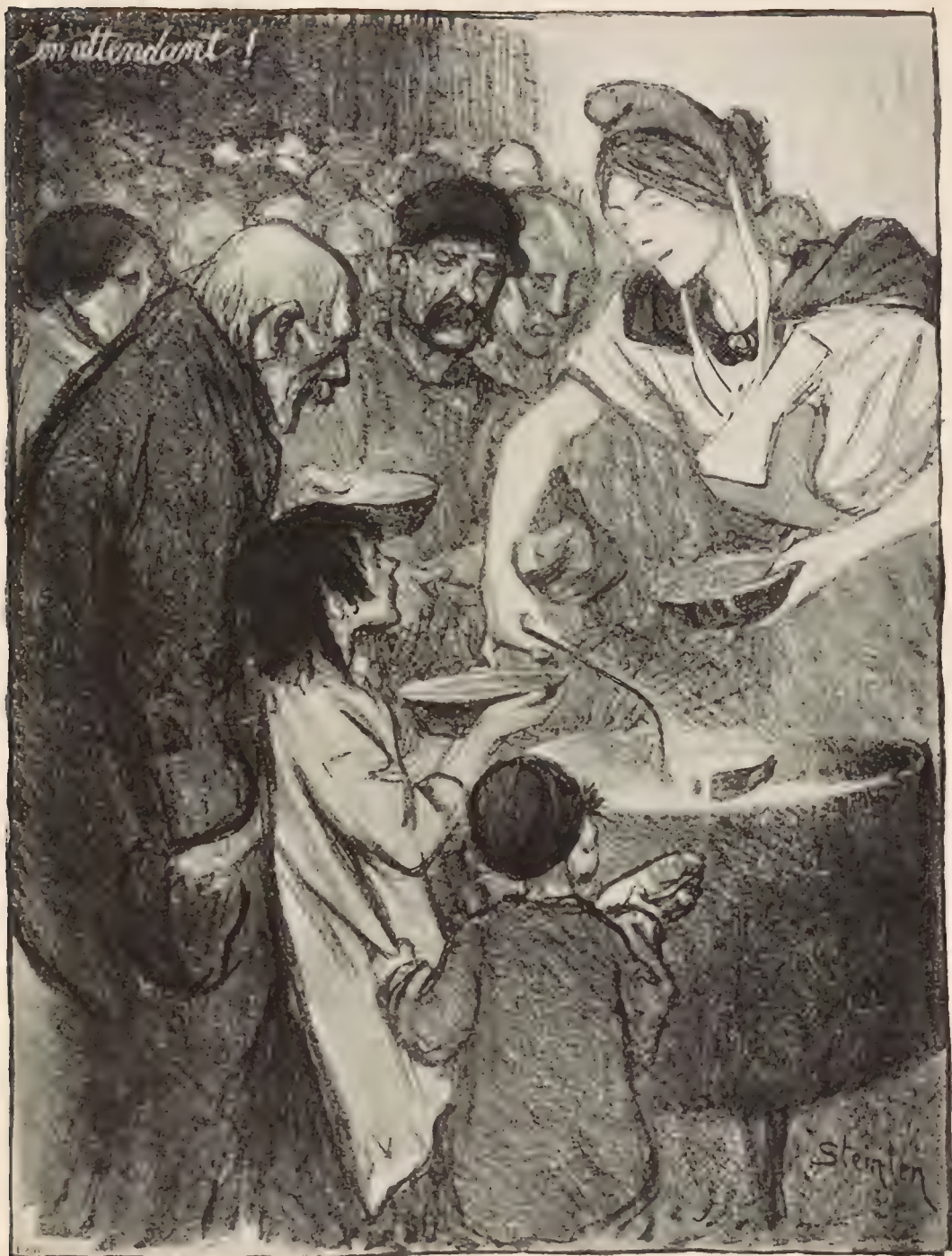
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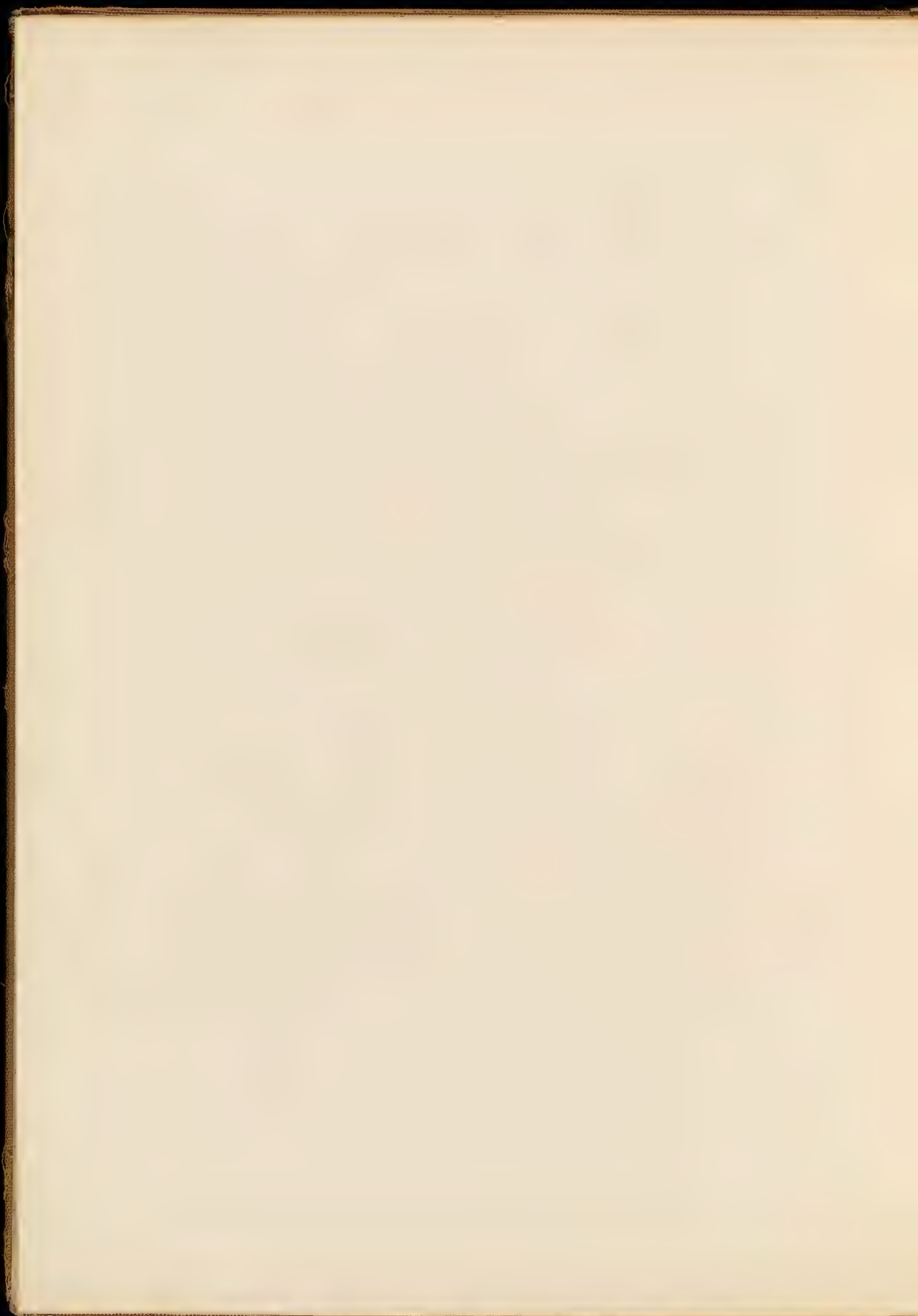




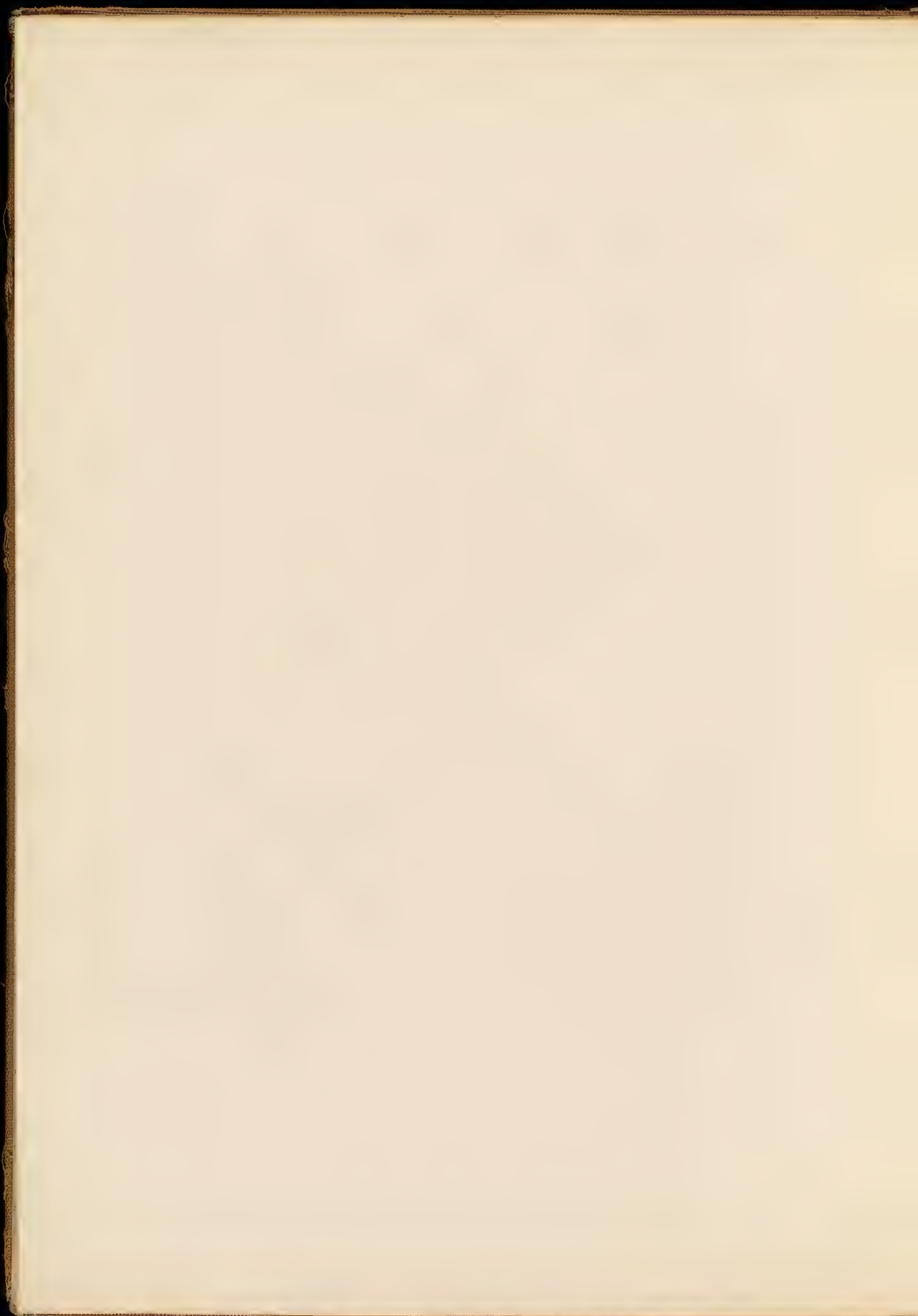
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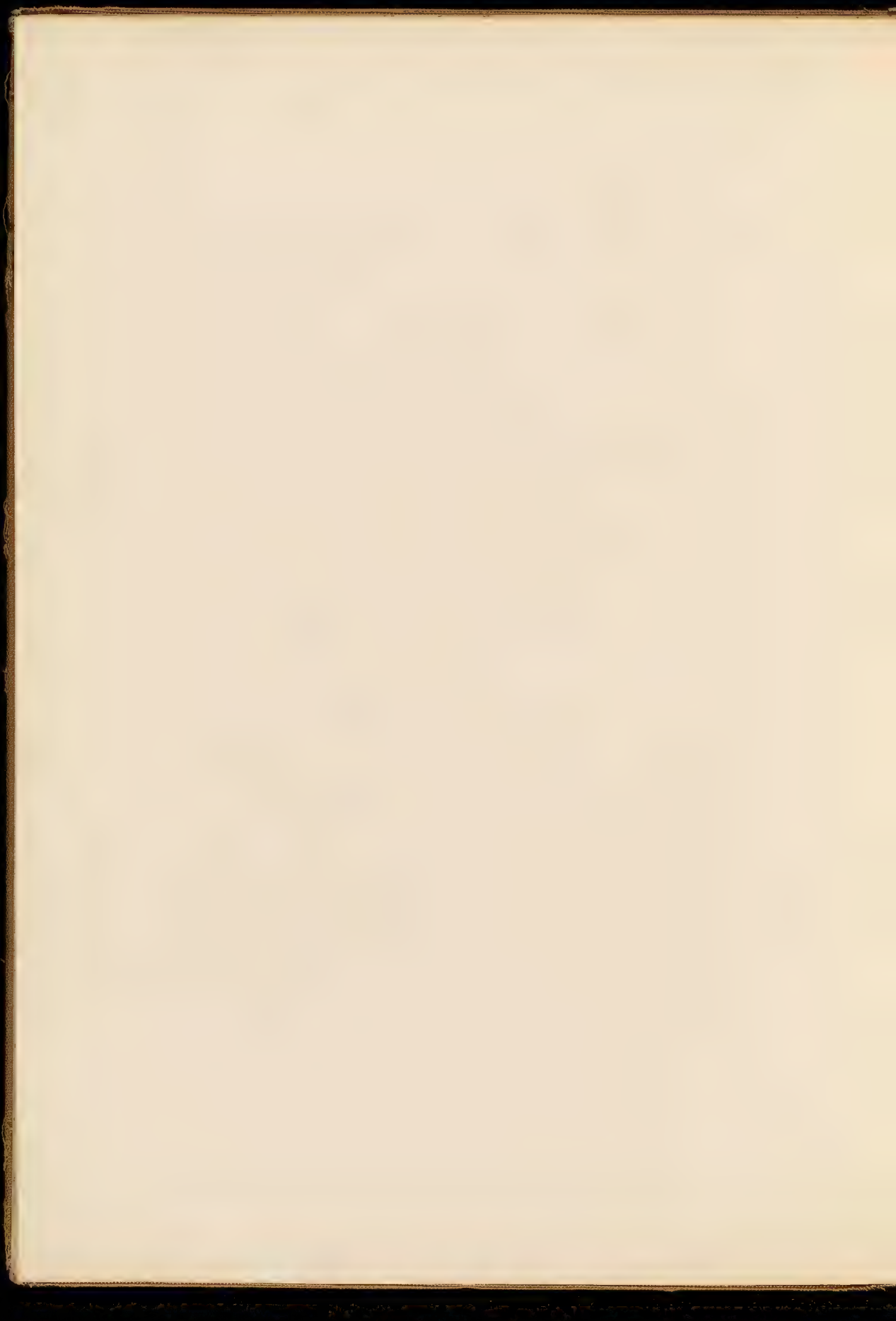




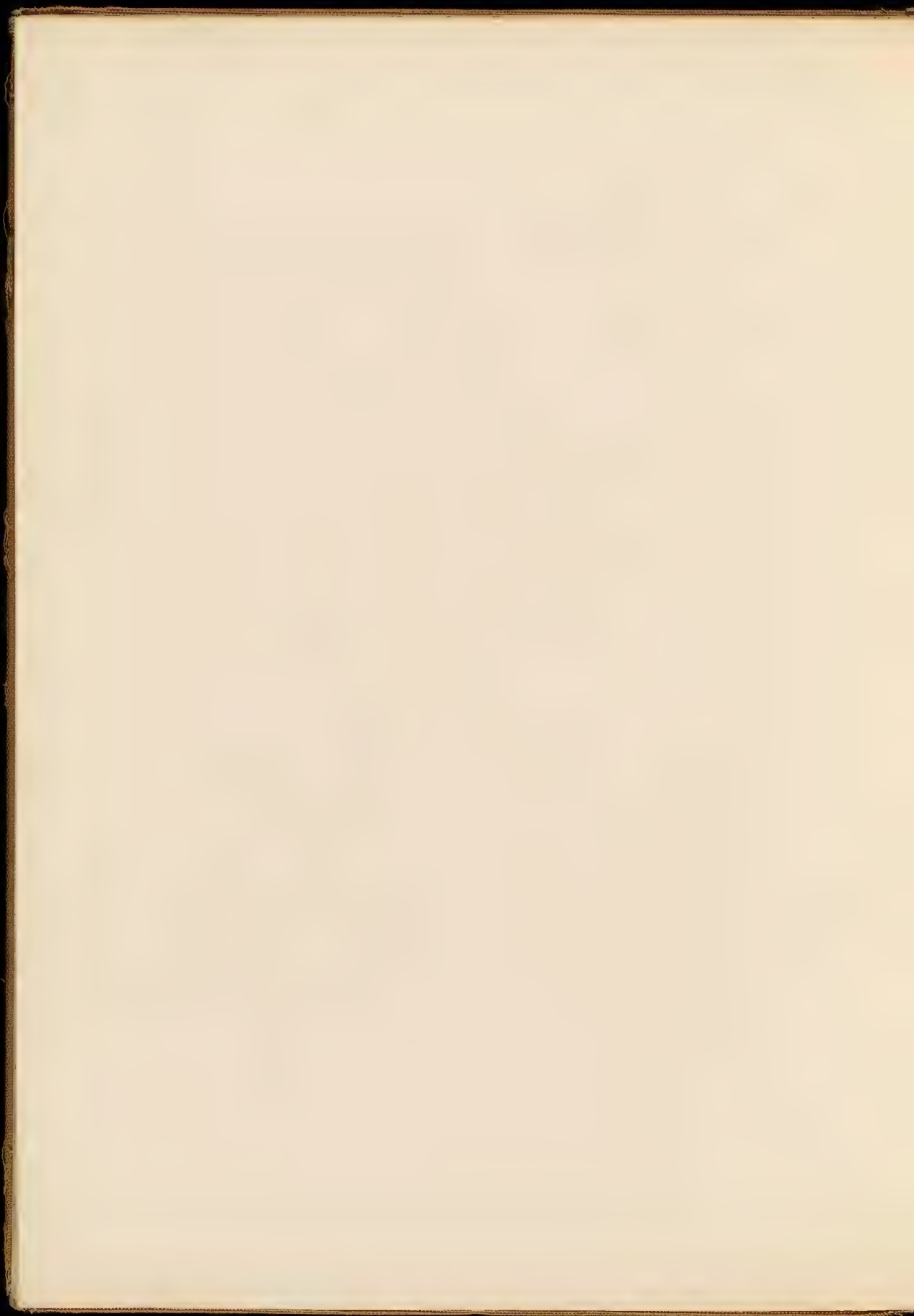




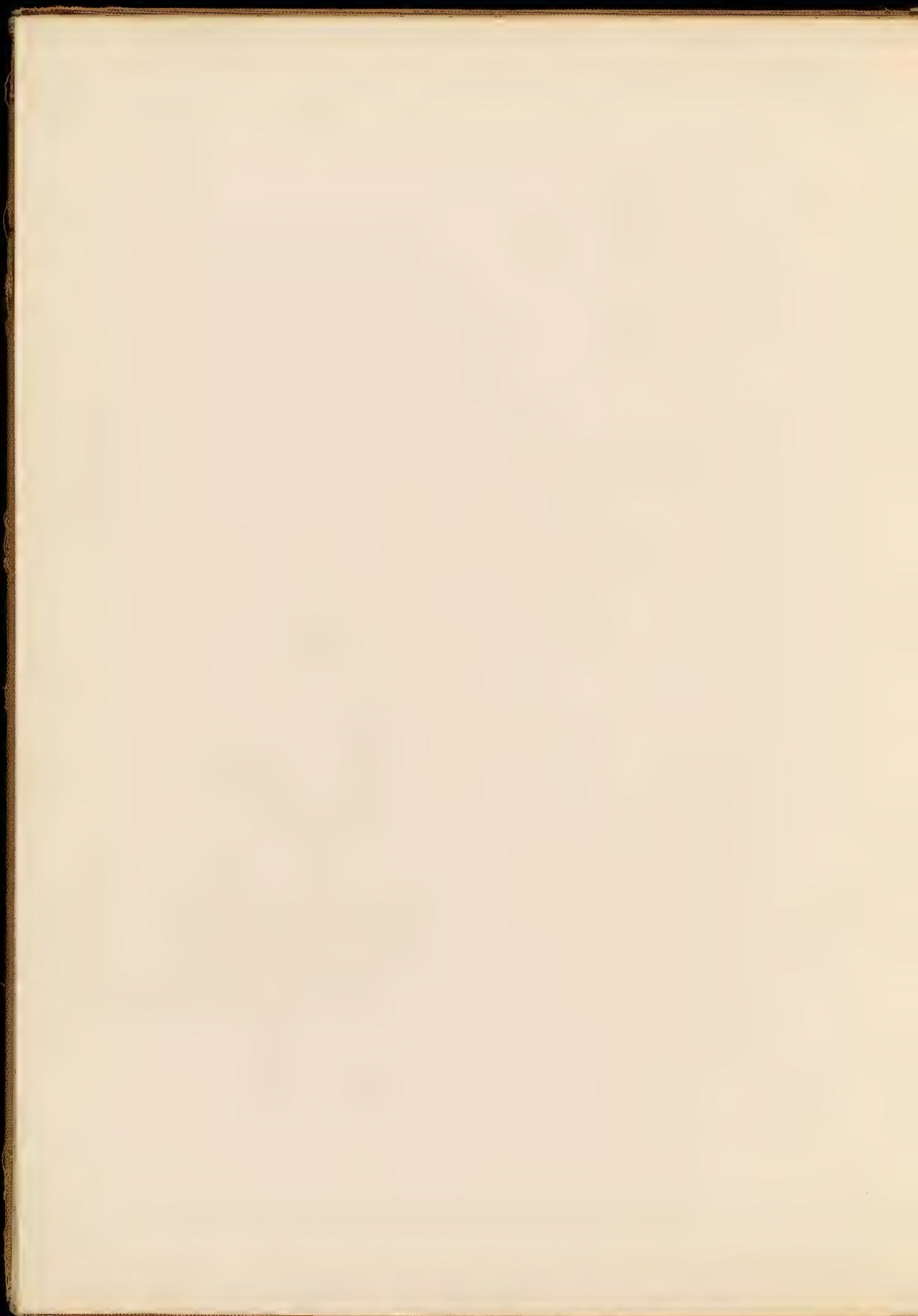




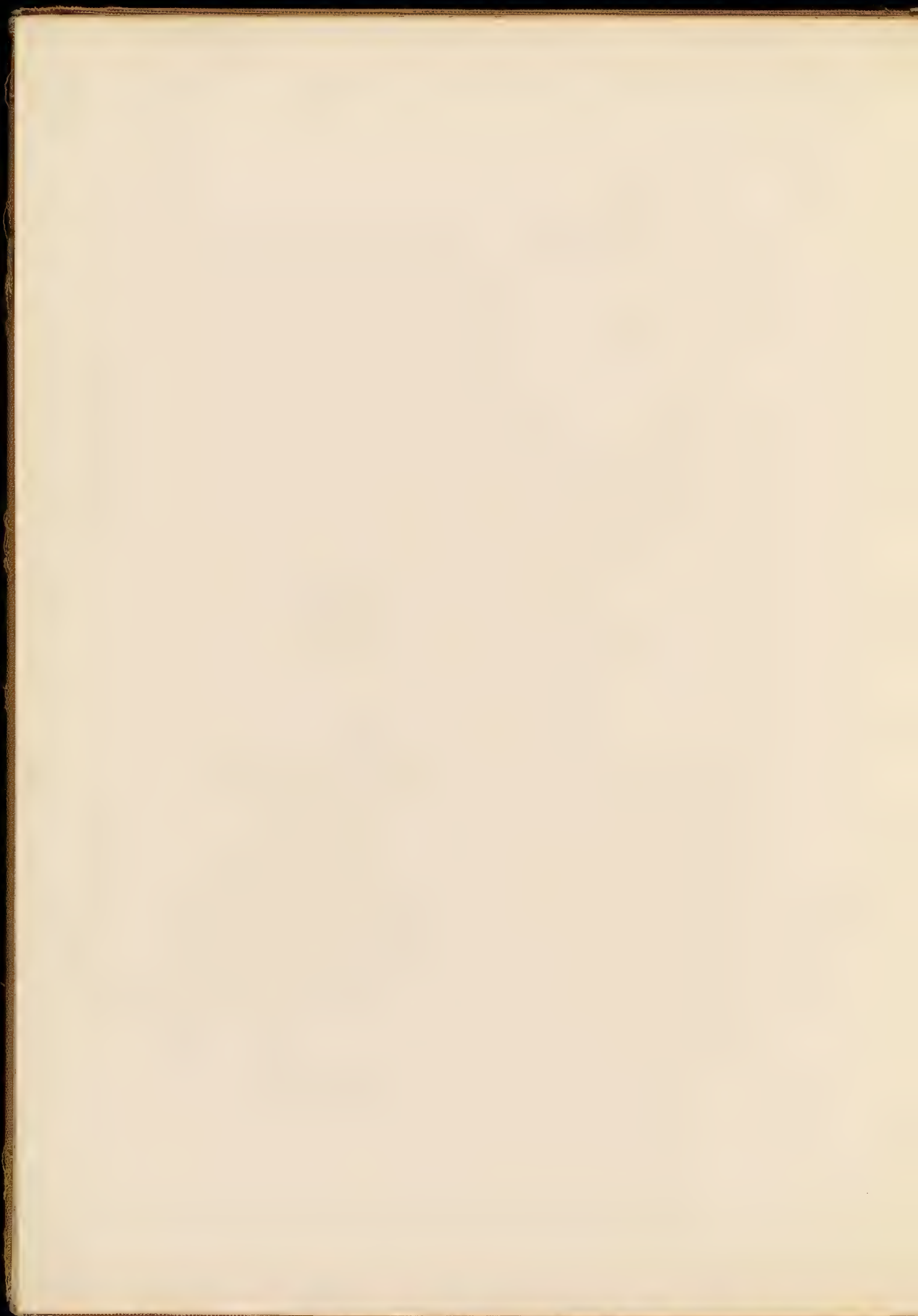




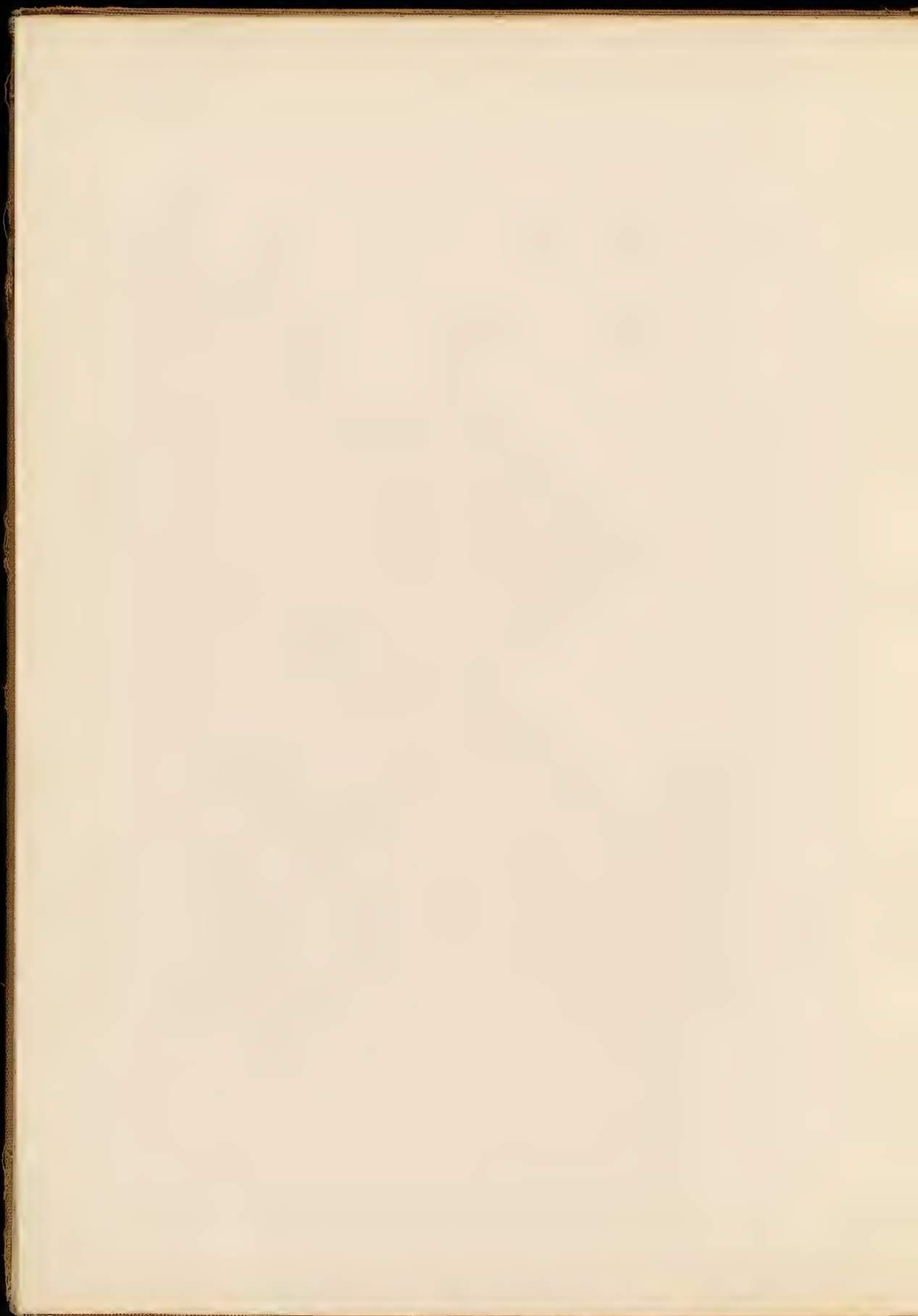






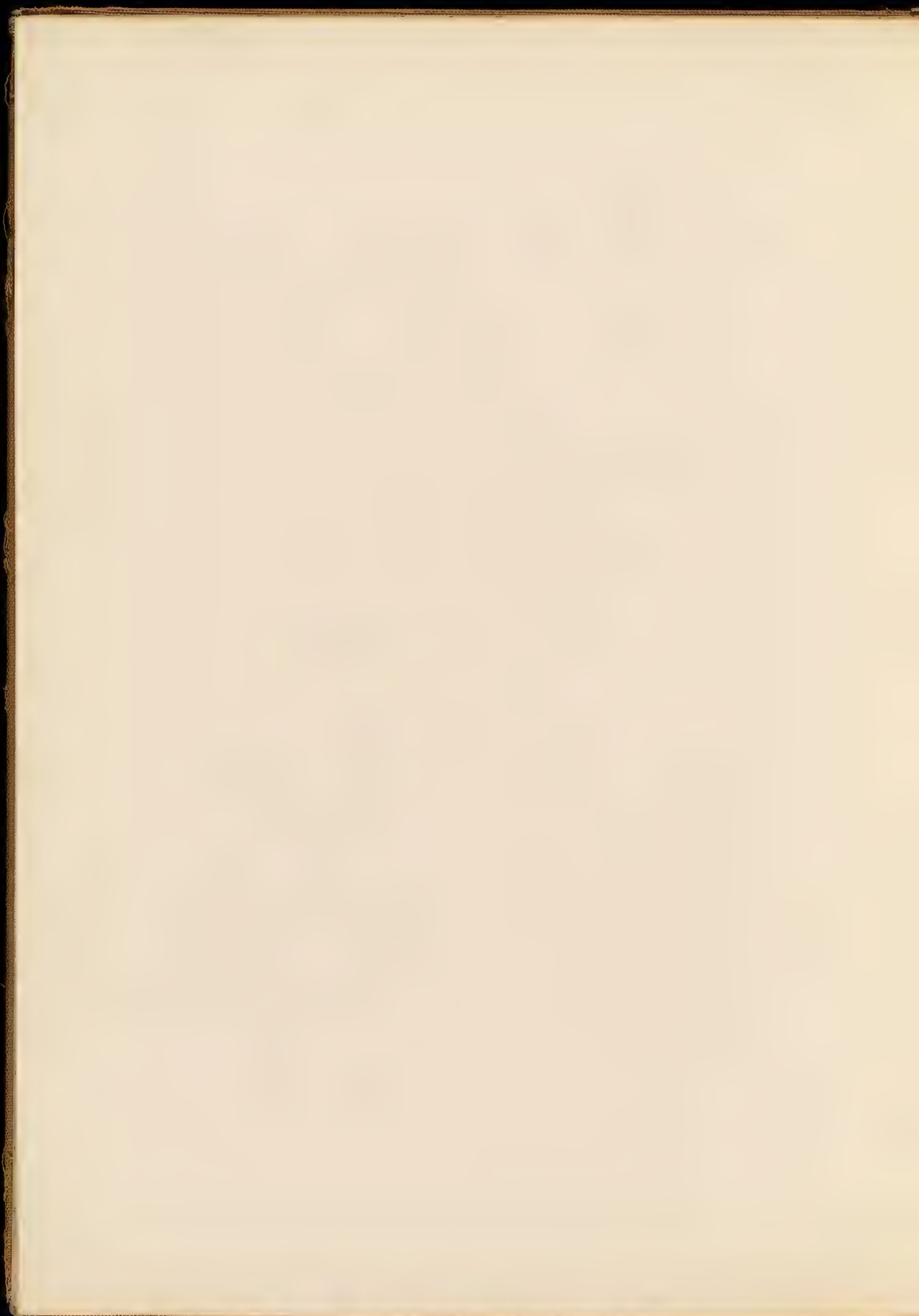




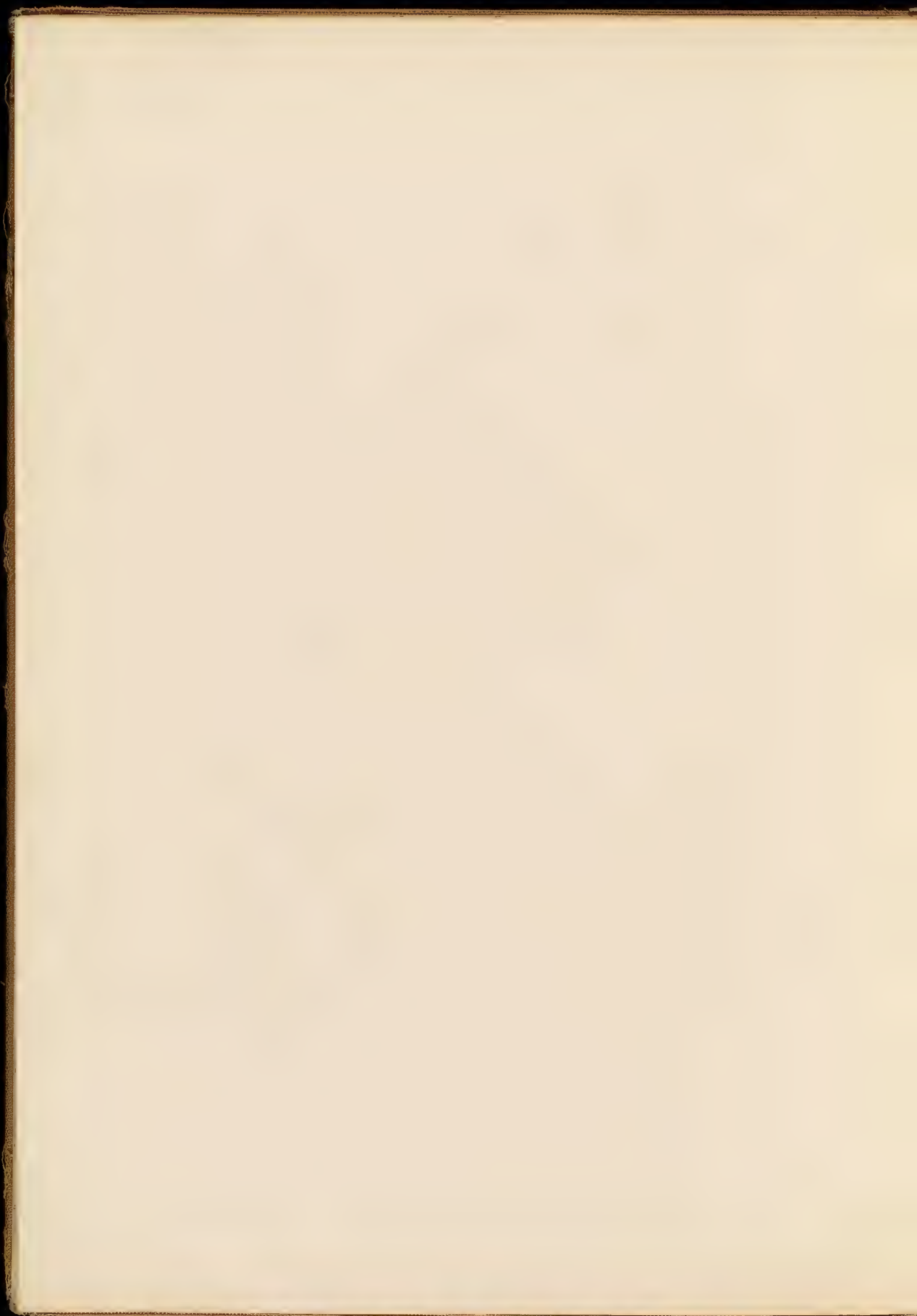




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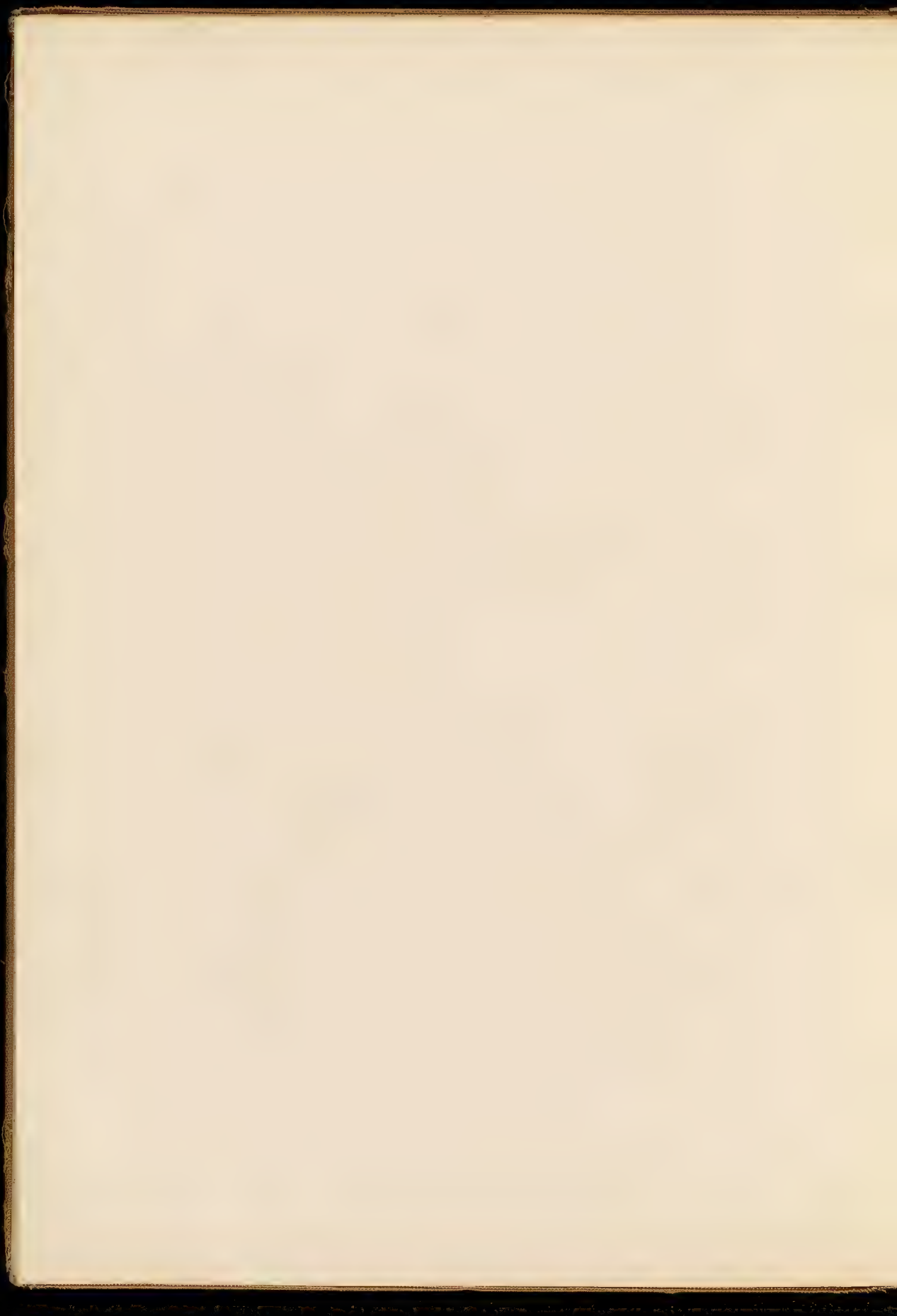




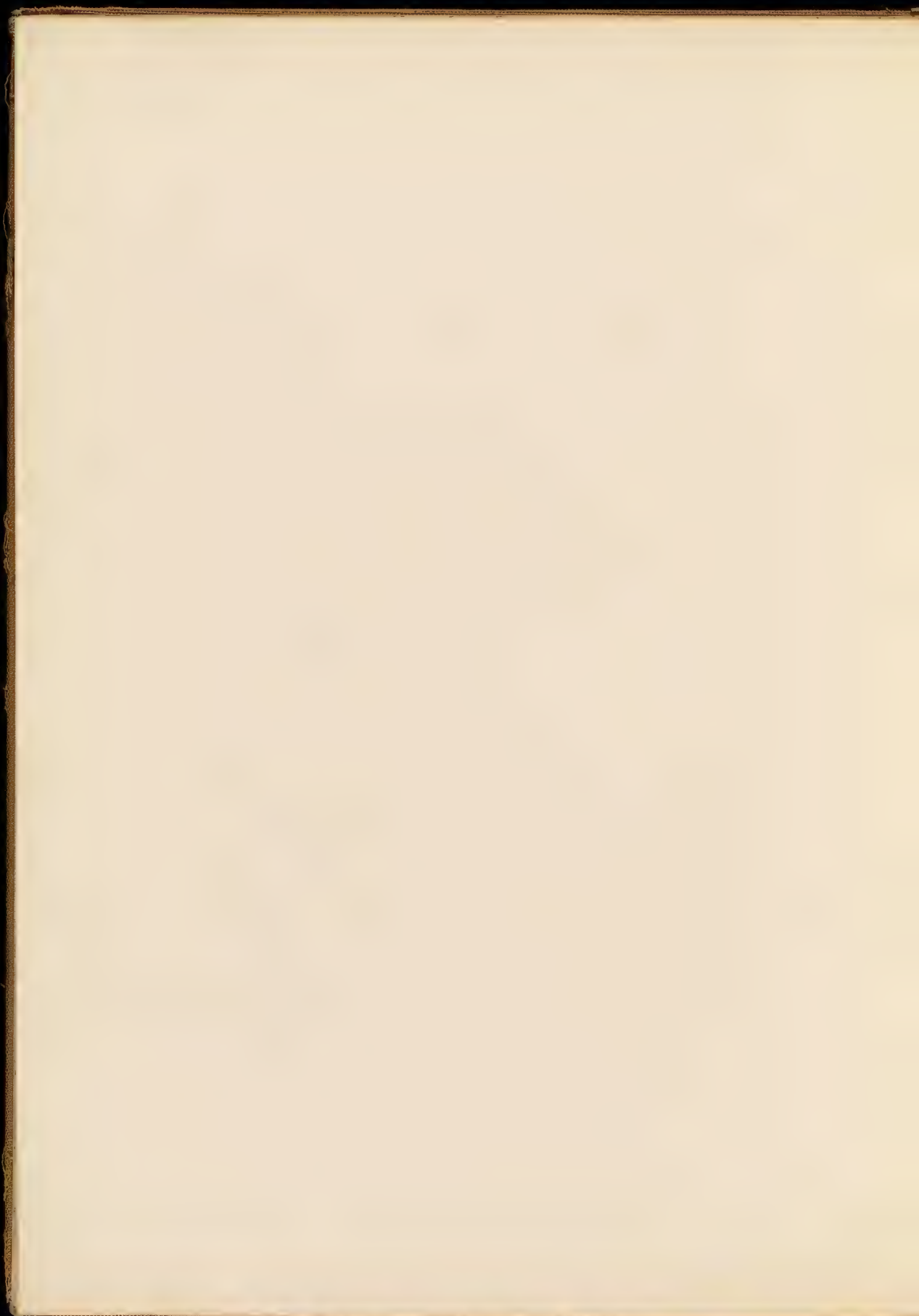




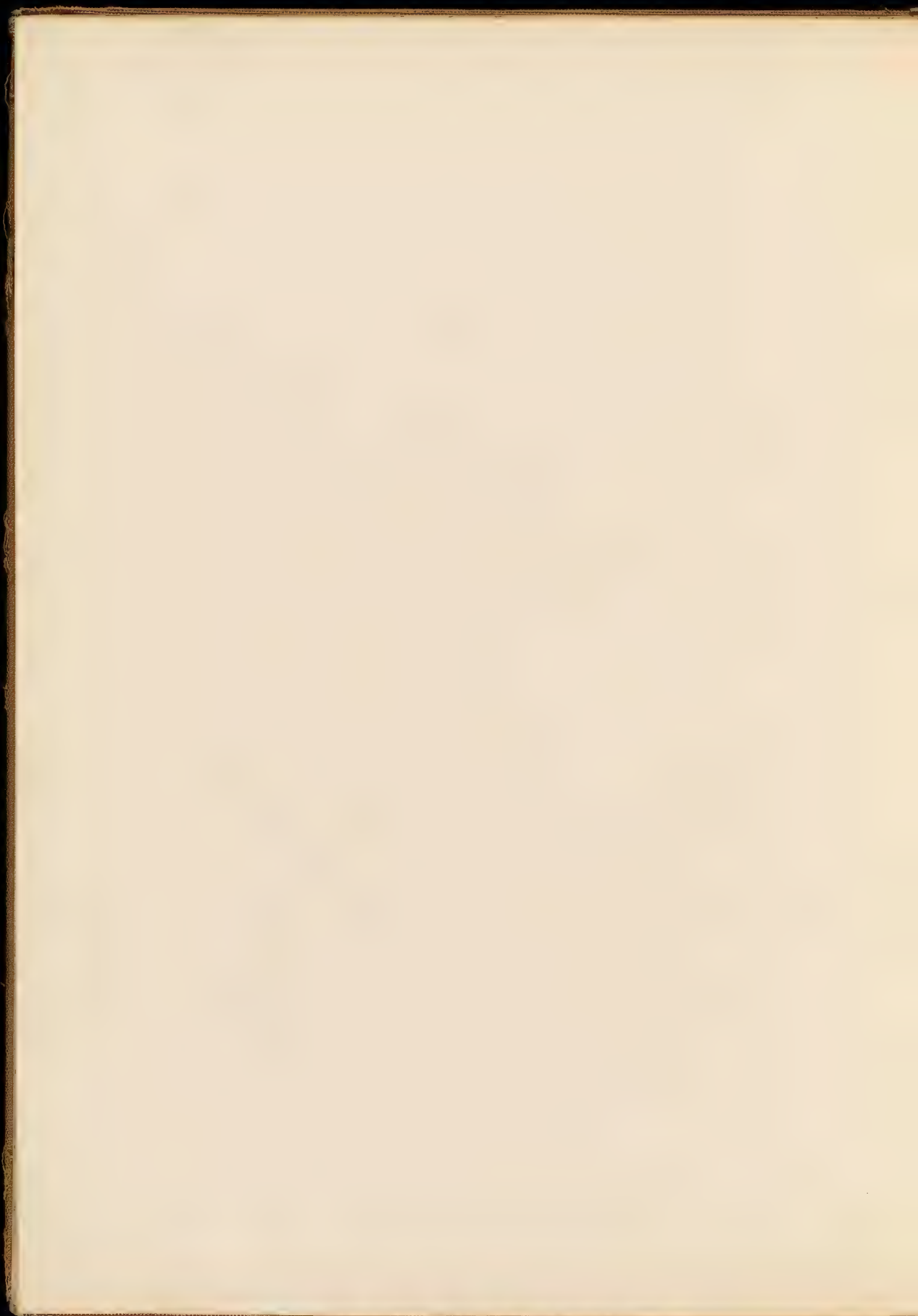
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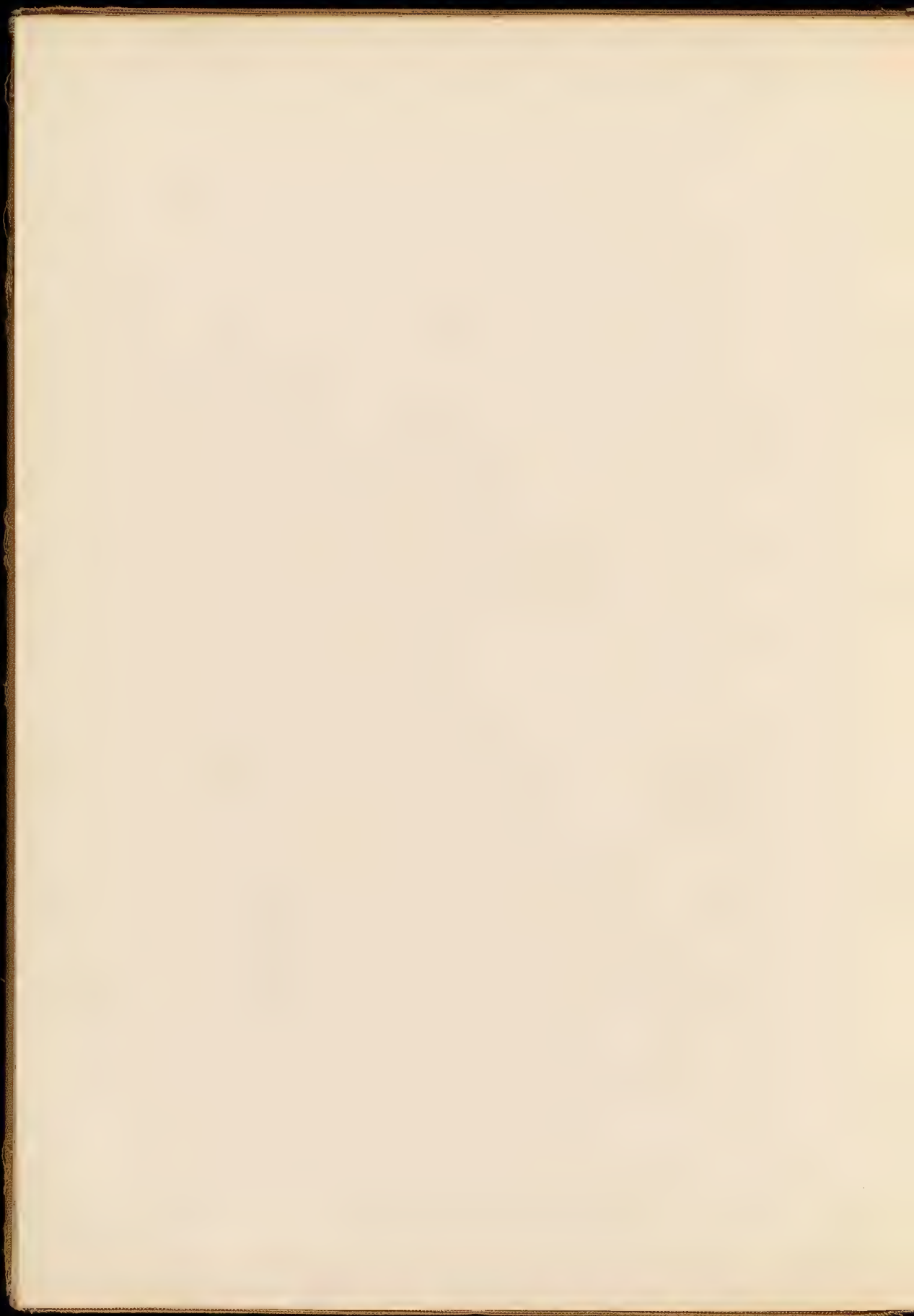




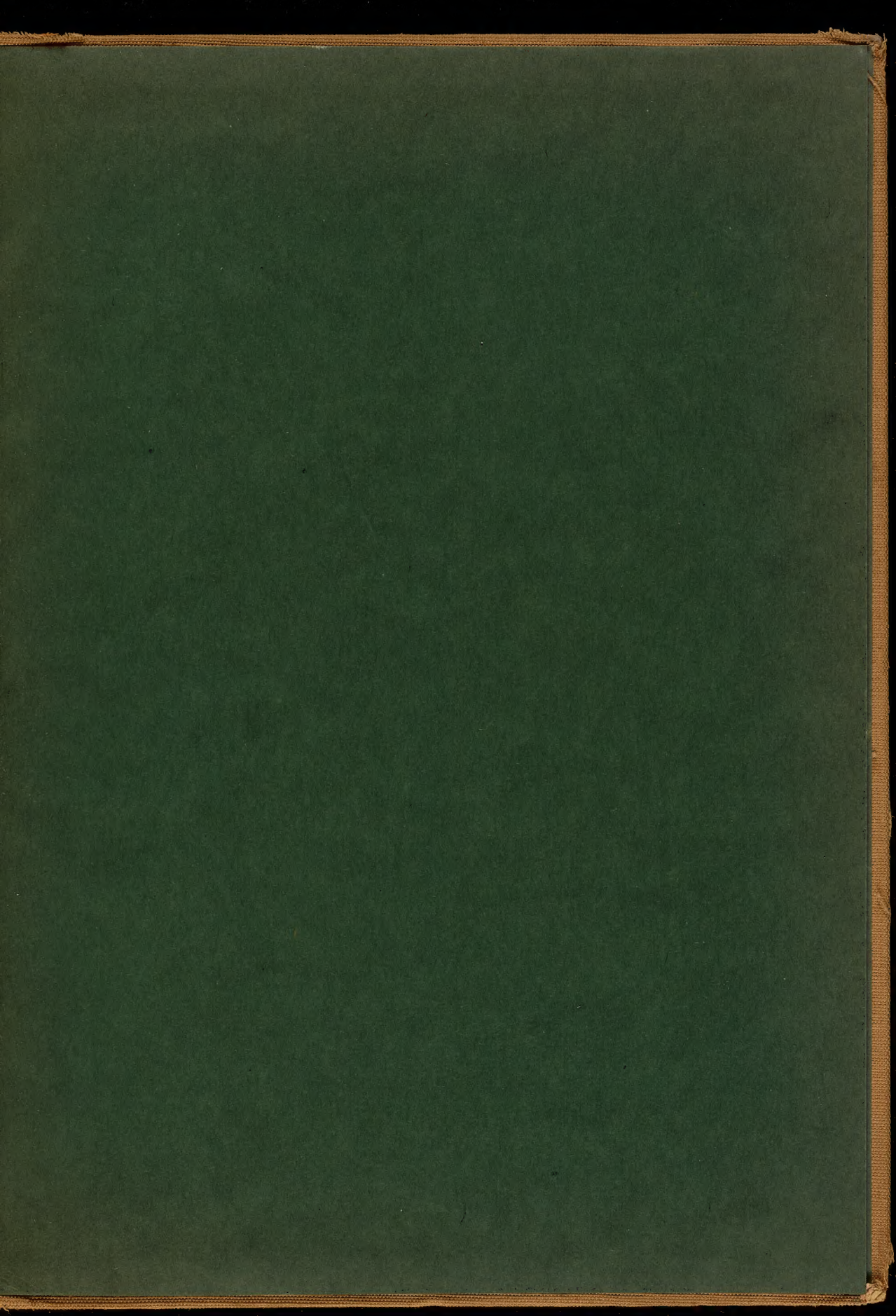













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